





ISLAND OF DESTINY

BY
ARTHUR J. REES

Te semper anteit sæva Necessitas
Clavos trabales et cuneos manu
Gestans æna.—HORACE.



NEW YORK
DODD, MEAD AND COMPANY
1923

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Price \$7.00

PRINTED IN THE U. S. A. BY
The Quinn & Boden Company
BOOK MANUFACTURERS
RAHWAY NEW JERSEY

SEP 20 '23

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ISLAND OF DESTINY

ISLAND OF DESTINY

CHAPTER I

ALONE

1

THE giant rollers were breaking with the sound of thunder on the glittering obsidian cliffs, and the air was heavy with the impending calamity of a great storm. An inky sky drooped low, and the waves leapt to meet it in a skirl of foam. Between the flat expanse above and the moving surface below the wind whirred with the noise of a million humming tops, and the water rushed to the horizon in a waste of raging grey.

Islands, mere barren rocks, were scattered in that desolate sea like mushrooms in a meadow; an unstable meadow which covered the smaller islands with each turbulent rush. They disappeared and emerged glistening, then disappeared again, while clouds of seabirds hovered, settled, and hovered once more with loud cries.

The island with the glittering cliffs was the largest by far; a giant mushroom bursting from the sea to the height of a thousand feet. Above its cliffs of obsidian basalt rose hills clothed with trees and thick with undergrowth.

Around it desolation reigned supreme, and loneliness held sovereign sway. The breakers foamed in inchoate madness among the rocky islets, and seabirds screamed mournfully above an empty sea which ran unchecked to

the southern rim of the globe. It was a scene where a god, tired of solitude, might have brooded fresh schemes for peopling dead worlds, but the last spot where one would have expected his highest handiwork on this to be found.

Yet a man stood there; a motionless dark speck upon the brink of the glittering cliffs in the lowering dusk of that cheerless evening.

The clouds parted, and revealed a red sun hanging on the horizon like a distorted eye which seemed to stare at the solitary figure upon the cliffs. The man watched it earnestly. It plunged beneath the water as he looked, trailing a last gleam of light across the dark sea like a streak of blood, and the wings of night threw monstrous shadows across the sky. The islands and the birds vanished from view in a bluish mist which began to spread over the surface of the waves. A large albatross swept rapidly overhead on snow-white pinions as though it feared the coming dark. The sea moaned uneasily. A drop of rain splashed warm and thick on the man's hand. It was the presage of the coming storm. With a final glance around him, and another at the black sky, he turned his back on the cliffs and walked away.

He kept to the heights until the cliffs dwindled and declined into a sagging rocky extremity which disappeared beneath the sea. Where they started to fall away he turned into a path which dropped like a thread down the rocks to a strip of white beach below. Descending this path with care, he picked his way through the surf creaming on the beach until he reached a stone landing-place jutting into the sea. Behind the landing-place a green declivity stretched towards a high saddle of the hills, and in the open space was built a hut. As the man approached, the stillness of the dusk was broken by a

sound incongruous yet homelike in the primeval solitude—the joyous, welcoming bark of a dog.

2

Inside the hut it was dark, but a handful of fire glowed on the dim outline of homely things and the frisking shape of the dog. The man lit a swinging lamp. The stronger light gushed upon a beamed interior, furnished roughly. A table, two chairs, a dresser with crockery and a dangling frying-pan, some lockers to stow away stores; things like these, with a few books on a shelf affixed to the wall, composed the interior and gave it an aspect of home. A small window with shutters looked out on the sea, and an aperture opposite showed a sleeping-place with a fixed berth, more lockers, a storm lantern hanging from the beam, and a candlestick and book upon a chair.

The man disappeared into the sleeping-place, reappeared, and set about getting supper. The dog on the hearth thumped an expectant tail. The man fried bacon in the pan, and brought some ship's biscuits from one of the lockers. Supper cooked, man and dog shared it together—except the coffee which the man brewed in a little pot, and drank black and strong from a thick white cup. The meal finished, the dog stretched himself in blinking content before the fire. The man tidied up, threw more wood on the fire, and sat down with a book and pipe.

The book was Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads*. It opened in his hands at "A Ballad of Burdens." He read:

"The burden of dead faces. Out of sight
And out of love, beyond the reach of hands."

He read no further. The volume dropped unheeded from his hands as he sat there, staring sombrely into the

flames. Thought is one of the few things which is free to all and can be pursued anywhere. This man had special facilities for it. His meditations were never interrupted. He had no companion save his dog, to whom speech had been denied, and he was cut off from all human companionship by three hundred miles of ocean now lashing and roaring in fury against the obsidian cliffs of the island where he lived alone.

The chain of circumstances which brought him there stretched nine months back to a colonial city of wooden houses perched in crazy tiers around the steep slopes of a circular bay. Destiny's agent was a spectacled clerical cog in the Colonial Government's official machinery; head clerk in the Conservations Department which administered the barren islands marked on official maps as portion of the Colonial Government's "dominions." In the department's gift was the vacant curatorship of Bird Sanctuary Island, with such advantages as £100 per annum, quarters, rations, and a free life bestowed. In spite of these benefits and a deplorable increase in local unemployment, there was not a rush of applicants for the job. To be quite accurate, there was none at all until James Raymond applied. The official cog regarded him dubiously. The applicant had a dubious and reckless air. He appeared to be of a gentlemanly derelict type which unfortunately found its way to the Utopia of Colonial Governments from the islands or heaven knew where by every incoming boat. The official mind considered. The man looked hard up, but he was young, with a strong frame. The post had to be filled. The Leader of the Opposition had blandly interrogated the Government about it. Yes; he would have to do. There was no one else. The place was hundreds of miles from anywhere, and the periodical calls of the lighthouse steamer were irregular. The last

curator had gone mad in the solitudes—was found hopping about the cliffs, suffering from the hallucination that he was an albatross. With this episode in his mind the head clerk felt it expedient to explain to the new applicant that the post was in the nature of a lonely one. There had been an assistant curator at one time, but the assistant had been abolished in response to public demand for national retrenchment.

“But there’ll be a dog,” the head clerk proceeded to explain, “and a dog is such company. The Government steamer calls every four months with stores. The curator is absolutely his own master, subject to the preparation of periodical reports to this department. The duties are light, but sufficient to keep the mind occupied. On the whole, a healthy, open-air life, if you do not mind a little loneliness—to which, no doubt, one soon becomes accustomed.”

“I’m not afraid of solitude,” the applicant replied. “I prefer it to humanity. I’ll go, if you’ll have me.”

The head clerk rolled up a large scale map on whose glittering surface the group of islands appeared like specks dusted from a pepper-pot.

“The Department may be disposed to consider your application. Your name is——”

“Raymond—James Raymond.”

“Very well, Mr. Raymond. Would you be prepared to go to the island by the lighthouse steamer leaving on Thursday?”

“Yes.”

Six days later the *Ascanius* crept cautiously through the sea of tombstone rocks towards the wooded eminence which showed like the brown back of a squatting camel above the glittering cliffs of Sanctuary Island. The steamer anchored well out, dark smoke floating sullenly

from her white funnel, while a boat conveyed James Raymond, a dog, and four months' stores through the treacherous reefs to the island's one landing-place. Captain Marquet was glad when the task was accomplished and his boat safely back from that place of fearful currents, whirlpools, and implacable cliffs on which the sea broke with menacing roar. The steamer's head swung round to the south. She went on her way, leaving the new curator to the solitude of the South Pacific, his stores scattered about the rocks above which seabirds circled in screaming flocks. Captain Marquet carried away with him, as a last impression of his passenger, the memory of a tall figure standing motionless on the shingle beach, the dog at his side, watching the departing ship.

That was nine months ago. The *Ascanius* had paid two of her periodic visits to the island since. She had delivered stores, but no letters. Apparently James Raymond had no friends; no one in the world who cared whether he lived or died. Captain Marquet, a sociable gossiping soul, was worried over a man who had nobody to write to him: neither friends, relations, chick nor child. He regarded such an existence as rather sinister. It even excited his indignation. He retailed it as a piece of remarkable news to the lighthouse keepers on his southern circuit. "Not so much as a newspaper," he added emphatically, in fitting climax. The grave bearded faces of the lighthouse men reflected his own astonishment, as in a mirror. They received letters and newspapers—whole bundles of them—by every visit of the *Ascanius*. Friends who had not perhaps mastered all the grades of penmanship could at least manage to address a newspaper. To their simple way of thinking such a state of affairs was insupportable. The keeper of Cape Bleak Lighthouse, the southernmost fingerpost to the Ice Barrier, expressed

the view that the island caretaker must be as lonely as a skua gull. His eye rested on one of those Antarctic harbingers as he spoke. Captain Marquet's glance followed the flight of the bird. "He's a damned queer lot," he said, referring to Raymond. "I took him out there, and I ought to know. An Englishman, I should say with a reserved and superior air—this damned keeper of a bird preserve. I told my chaps when they landed his stores to bring him back in the boat for a final taste, but he sent back word that he preferred to stay ashore. He'll wait a long time before I ask him again. Mark my words, he's a queer lot. Never a letter, never a newspaper! It might mean—lots of things."

His listeners concurred, and Captain Marquet and the *Ascanius* went on to the next lighthouse to tell the story anew. He was a welcome visitor among the keepers. They, at least, did not decline his offer to have a taste.

3

James Raymond lived his solitary life on the island unaware that he was the cause of gossip among southern lighthouses. He had his duties: birds to look after during the day, reports and maps to prepare at night. The island had not been proclaimed a sanctuary for the sea-fowl which swooped and cried around its shining cliffs. They needed no sanctuary, no help from man. Their screams mockingly derided that idea. By proclamation and adoption it was a home for softer inland species of rare plumage, officially protected from the rapacity of collectors and agents of the plumage trade. It was an ingenious method of preserving such birds from extinction, and one worthy of the paternal instincts of a Colonial Government. The island was too far away for

agents, and so difficult to land upon that any collector tempted thither for specimens was more likely to add himself to Death's unrivalled collection than enrich his own.

The island showed glittering teeth to the sea, but the eminence above the cliffs was seamed with sheltered and wooded ravines where these birds from the mainland acclimatised and increased. Nature had made a sanctuary of the island before the Colonial and paternal Government hit upon the idea. Birds were sometimes blown there by the winds, and deposited—soaked and flustered bundles of feathers—in this haven of refuge where abundance awaited them. They never attempted to leave the island again. They knew the difficulties of that journey. Brought there on the wings of the wind, they stayed and multiplied, in the care of the curator. The rare birds—those specially protected by Act of Parliament—were his chief solicitude. He fed them and guarded their nests, restored impulsive nestlings to anxious parents, and shot the wild cats which stalked them. The dog had been trained to warn him when these sly creatures with yellow eyes were prowling after his charges, and tracks he had made from his hut took him quickly to every part of the island.

The birds repaid his care by singing to him, or it may be their song was an outpouring of gratitude for their safe journey to that spot. They sang of mornings, in a grove at the back of the hut, starting the new day with a tremulous fluted chorus which awakened their custodian from sleep. They had learnt to know and trust him, and they watched for his coming with fearless bright eyes, hopping and fluttering around him for the breakfast he scattered at his feet. There were birds with most gorgeous plumage, of a kind he had never seen, and smaller

homelier sorts which reminded him of English songsters, but they were all happy together in their island home, and preserved the amenities of bird life with an innocent decorum. They had nothing to fear except the wild cats, and James Raymond hunted them remorselessly.

He had other duties to perform besides looking after his birds of song and bright plumage. The neighbouring islands had to be visited in the boat which was moored to the landing-place. He might have felt justified in disregarding an order which seemed merely to demonstrate the futility of the official mind which had framed his duties (as set out in the official White Paper which the chief clerk of the Conservations Department had given him), but he never did. He conscientiously performed all the tasks scheduled in the White Paper, and therein Duty XXI was set out as follows: "Once in every fourteen days the curator shall inspect and report upon the well-being of the seabirds on the surrounding islands, and shall take any measures which may be deemed advisable." The official mind had not indicated the nature of these measures, nor when the necessity for them was supposed to arise, James Raymond did not know either. But the order was clear, so once a fortnight he gravely "inspected" the rookeries (as he called them) of penguin and albatross on the rocks which rose from the sea around Sanctuary Island like monuments of some graveyard of the deep.

It was a strange sight if anyone could have seen it, this tour of inspection of these southern solitudes made by a small motor-boat with a solitary figure steering, and a barking dog in the bow, darting perilously among the sounds and currents of those barren islets covered with hordes of shrieking and staring seabirds. There were gulls, albatrosses, penguins, nellies, mollyhawks, whale-

birds, shags, petrels: every kind and species of seabird inhabited this mysterious region of deep waters and empty islands, which stretched, big and little, to the distant horizon that concealed the southern ice. It was their home.

The clouds of seabirds which returned to the islands at night from afar imposed on the senses as an event monstrous and incredible. James Raymond scaled the obsidian cliffs of his island every evening to watch the sight. It seemed impossible that the world could harbour so many birds. The air was dark with them, the sea swarmed with them. There was something vaguely disturbing to the imagination in the contemplation of that feathered multitude. The desolate sea of rocky islets might have been the assembling place of every seabird on earth, a place beyond humanity's ken, whether they repaired nightly for some secret purpose of their own. From dusk to dark they kept arriving as though in obedience to an imperative command. From unknown parts they dropped from the sky or came from the ocean to form motionless roosting platoons upon the glistening rocks or dreary stretches of dark sand, and their unending cries were borne to the dweller on the obsidian island like the chirping of a great host of cicadæ, rising and falling with the melancholy cadence of a goblin choir intoning a liturgy of woe.

4

It was a strange life for a human soul, with nothing to break the eternal round of solitude save the rare visits of the *Ascanius*, bringing rations—but no letters. Captain Marquet had been known to express the opinion that the man who called himself James Raymond had sought

this remote spot to hide himself from justice under an assumed name. Captain Marquet's imagination could not conceive of a man preferring to live alone, sufficient unto himself, like a god. Yet this world holds such men. Or it may have been that nobody was interested enough in James Raymond to care whether he was alive or dead. Again, the world holds many such men. But, whatever the reason, the curator of Sanctuary Island was revealed by his own act as one cut off from his kind, holding no further communion with them.

It was a strange life, but the man who now sat staring into the glowing fire had not found it an unhappy one. He had gained a measure of peace—of respite. Nature had done much for him since he had been set down with his stores on the landing-place nine months before. She had redeemed the good body she had given him at birth. Like a stern and righteous mother she had taken him in hand. He came to her a wreck, and she had made him a man again: at least in outward seeming. The sea and wind had buffeted out of him the physical deterioration of twelve wandering years. The rough, open-air life had hardened his muscles, braced his nerves, made keen and clear the English blue of his eyes, and tanned his fair English skin into the deep brown of perfect health.

He had sought sanctuary in this distant island with the birds, and he had found it. But who shall say where man gains peace? There were none to know if this man's spirit was at rest. The flickering light in the hut cast gleams on his moody and weary face. Without was blackness and solitude. The dog, muzzle thrust out on crossed paws, slept at his feet. Outside the storm reached its height, sweeping over the island in the darkness with the inarticulate roar of elemental rage, a shriek running through the uproar as if lost souls were being tor-

tured aloft without respite. The hut shook in the terrible violence of the gale, and the swinging lamp oscillated in sympathy. Even the sea-birds might well have hugged their roosts on such a night.

The man by the fire nodded. He had spent the day making a new track to the top of the island, and he was wearier than he knew. Slumber, deep and profound, overcame him as he sat there. He slept the sleep of complete exhaustion—slept undisturbed throughout the storm.

The hours slipped past. The hut fire smouldered down to a faint glimmer, then expired in black dissolution. The storm outside began to abate, with moments of unnatural stillness in the midst of its strife, as though mysteriously pausing to listen.

It was at such a moment that some shadowy perception reached the inner consciousness of the sleeper, and awakened him with a start.

CHAPTER II

THE COMING OF THE DEAD

1

HE awoke with a beating heart and a sense of fear. It seemed to him that he had been brought out of that profound sleep by a terrible cry. A dream of course, but how vivid! The scream was still echoing and ringing in his ears. He looked around him, and encountered the gleaming eyes of the dog, staring at him in terror. The door flew open, as at a push from an unseen hand, and the hut was filled with rushing air. In the gulf of darkness beyond the open door a violet arc suddenly appeared, flashed and curved across the sky, hung suspended for a moment, and then as swiftly died away. Raymond sprang to his feet with a quick perception of the truth. A ship was in distress among the rocks of Sanctuary Island.

He lit a lantern and went out, followed by the dog. A late moon, scudding low, shone faintly on waves leaping like grey wolves at the throat of the sky. Raymond made his way to the landing-place. The sea was dashing over it and breaking with a hollow roar far up the shingle beach.

His eye discerned nothing but a dishevelled expanse of water pierced by naked rocks. There were no more rockets and no further cries, if, indeed, he had been awakened by a cry. Once he thought he saw a dark mass in the boiling surf at the foot of the cliffs, but before he could be sure it was gone, sucked into one of the caverns

at the base. Wreckage? It was possible. No ship could live long among those rocks, in that sea.

Raymond held his watch to the lantern. Four o'clock! Nearly dawn. He stood there, waiting for day to come.

Daybreak revealed a subsiding sea still running high. No more—at first; only the familiar spectacle of an endless grey immobility, islets, and crying birds. Then Raymond's eyes, dwelling far out, fell upon something floating in the distant water with seabirds sailing overhead. A mere black speck at first, it gradually grew larger, pointing a course direct for the island, at one moment poised high on the white crest of a wave, then slipping smoothly down into a polished green hollow. Nearer it came, until it disclosed itself to the watcher on the shore as a piece of wreckage supporting the body of a drowned man. Merely a few planks bound together, with an upright spar flying a fluttering strip of canvas as a signal for one beyond all aid. The drowned man had lashed himself to the spar, and seemed in the act of guiding his flimsy raft towards the landing-place. The seabirds circled the wreckage with loud screams, and in the unstable water the corpse bowed gravely and repeatedly to the man on the beach, as though soliciting the honour of his further acquaintance.

The strange cortège swept inward, bobbed through the broken water of the reef, and entered the narrow channel which led to the landing-place, as if steered by a hand which had not lost its seaman's cunning. But it was a long while making harbour. Again and again it was washed back into the outer water. Whenever this happened the corpse bowed deeply, almost apologetically, to the waiting figure on the brink, and the gulls screamed in wild mockery at the dead man's inability to steer a course over a sea which they rode with such effortless ease. But

with dogged pertinacity the wreckage always returned, tossing in the angry foam, advancing, retreating, the corpse bowing, the birds screaming. At length a great wave swept it almost to the landing-place, and Raymond dashed into the water and hauled it ashore.

On the oozing beach he bent over the wreckage and disentangled the body of a man with brown skin, dark hair, and glazed dark eyes which now reproached an indifferent sky. The dungarees and blackened hands suggested he had been a fireman on the lost ship. On his naked and hairy breast was tattooed a woman's face and the words "Good Luck."

"'Good Luck'! That was a talisman which failed," murmured Raymond.

The dog sniffed the body timidly, looked up at Raymond, and whined.

One dead hand clutched a ship's mail-bag; clutched it tightly, as if the sentiment of duty persisted in that simple mind after death; was, indeed, stronger than death. The dead eyes stared awfully at Raymond as he wrested the bag from his grasp, as though warning him to desist.

Raymond shook the contents of the bag on the sand. Letters and newspapers scattered at his feet. They were soaked with sea-water, which had loosened envelopes and wrappers and blurred the writing. Listlessly he turned over these human documents which had gone to wreck with the ship. Most of them were mere pulp, but here and there some loving message or homely phrase started out from the soaked sheets. A spongy bank-note pledged the Governor and Company of the Bank of England to pay the bearer on demand the sum of Five Pounds. A shining lock of baby hair stirred wistfully in the breeze. Remittance and token—never to be delivered.

There was one packet of newspapers, tightly bound, which had partly escaped the effect of the sea. Raymond picked up the bundle and turned it over. English newspapers! He cut the string which held them together. They fell apart, and from their midst a letter fluttered down on the wet rocks. It dropped with the superscription uppermost.

At the sight of the address Raymond uttered a sharp cry, staring down at the letter with features whitening rapidly into semblance of the dead man's. Motionless as a figure in stone he stood, his eyes fixed upon the fallen envelope at his feet, one hand outstretched before him with the unconscious gesture of a sleeper trying to ward off an incredible vision. His face bore the stamp of amazement, agony, and a certain terror.

The dog whimpered anxiously and a gull near the corpse gave him a beady glance, but he did not stir. Once his eye wandered from the letter to the dead messenger who had borne it to the island, but immediately returned to the white packet at his feet.

At length he came to himself and regained something of his former composure. With the dazed effort of a man emerging from oblivion, he stooped and picked the letter up. He turned it over with a troubled air, like one who still doubted its reality. His hands shook a little, but his eyes shone with some deeper feeling than mere excitement. The envelope he held bore signs of much travelling, and had been sent on and re-addressed from distant parts of the world. "Try Johannesburg"; "Try Singapore"; "Try Hong-Kong"; "Try Port Moresby"; "Try Honolulu"; "Try Papeete"; "Try Sydney"; "Try Auckland." These places started out like landmarks from shoals of directions to obscurer parts, where adventure quests romance afar from tourists' tracks, seek-

ing her vanishing footfalls with stout and eager heart. Addresses like these covered the letter back and front, weaving a fantastic border around the original direction in a female hand to "Robert Lynngarth, Esq., Poste Restante, Durban, Natal. Or Please Forward."

"Please Forward!" "Prière de faire suivre!" That was an injunction which had been well obeyed since the distant day when the letter was first posted in England. The postal authorities of many countries had done their best to carry out the behest. They had searched for Robert Lynngarth with a zeal which was an everlasting rebuke to all who sneer at the efficiency of Government service. Postal departments had pursued the wandering figure of Robert Lynngarth through the East and the Southern Hemisphere for years. They had stamped and franked his letter on from Africa, Asia, the East, and the Islands. It had sought him in places far apart: Bangkok, the Solomons, Broome, Invercargill; been rejected, and gone on its weary way again, the Flying Dutchman of the post offices of the world.

The ocean had sought to destroy it, but it had survived shipwreck. Then the sea had relented, and had succeeded where the postal systems had failed. The sea's dead messenger, riding ashore on his raft, had delivered the letter to one who had a better right to open it than anyone else.

This the man known as James Raymond seemed reluctant to do. Twice he essayed the task; hesitated, desisted, and finally placed the letter in the breast of his shirt. He then took off his coat and spread it over the prone form on the sand. The shrouding accomplished and the corpse decently covered, he turned away in the direction of the hut, the dog trotting behind.

Inside the hut his hesitation disappeared. He drew out the letter and laid it and the newspapers on the table before him. He examined the journals first. There were copies of the *Times* and *Morning Post* nearly nine years old. A blurred ink-mark around the "Personal" column of the *Times* caught his eye. It indicated an advertisement seeking news of Robert Lynngarth, who had left England three years before, and it offered a handsome reward for any information concerning him. Any information (which would be treated as confidential) was to be sent to a firm of London solicitors at Gray's Inn. A similar announcement appeared in the *Morning Post*, also marked.

Pushing the newspapers from him, Raymond picked up the letter and opened it.

Two enclosures fell out. One was in the writing of the address on the envelope; the second and smaller had been folded within it, and was addressed to "Dear Robert" in a childish and unformed hand. James Raymond looked from one to the other with tense eyes. Then he caught up the larger sheet and unfolded it. As he did so a scrap of paper fell from it and fluttered unheeded to the floor. He bent his head over the letter and read:

"MY DARLING SON,

"Why have you not written to let me know where you are? Since you left England three years ago I have had only one brief line to say that you had reached Durban and were going to the Zambesi. My letters to you remain unanswered. Perhaps you have not received them, but that is not a reason for not writing to your mother, in spite of what you said when you went away. I am

heartbroken by your silence. Cannot the past be lived down? Must you keep away from your mother and your home for ever? I feel sure that your father would forgive you now, and overlook whatever you have done, if you would only return and ask his forgiveness. Come back, then, dear, and do so. It is my daily and nightly prayer that you will. Is it pride or lack of money that is keeping you silent? If you need money, you have only to cable to my solicitor."

There was more, but the sea had obliterated the second sheet. A word here and a phrase there were all that James Raymond could make out.

". . . growing anxious . . . see you again . . . I fear . . . doctor . . . wish . . . reconciled to your father . . . remember . . ."

It was impossible to read any more.

He perused the first portion of the letter again before turning to the little note in the childish hand:

"DEAR BOB,

"Why don't you come back? I miss you dreadfully, and so does Crikey. He goes to your room every morning to look for you, and when I tell him that you'll be back some day he looks up at me with wistful eyes, just as though he understood. He chased a rabbit yesterday. I caught five trouts at the alder pool to-day, but I don't like fishing without you. So come back quick and let's have a good time together before I'm sent to the horrid old school.

"Your little Lady Fibbets.

"Postscript. If you're in Africa will you bring me some stamps with lions on them? But don't wait to collect them. I'd sooner have you without the lions.—

KATHLEEN."

Raymond sat still for a time in deep reverie. Then, like one awakened by importunate reality, he sprang to his feet and strode to his sleeping-place. He speedily returned carrying a worn leather case, which he placed on the table and opened.

Within were clothes and linen and other things: a small ivory Buddha, an inlaid box of Chinese mosaic, two nuggets, a piece of dull green jade fantastically carved into the shape of a bird—such odds and ends as a man accumulates in the course of unsettled wanderings in strange parts. He tossed these objects aside and ultimately found what he sought in some letters carefully tied together and faded with age. He opened the slender packet carefully. The embossed crest and engraved address were those of the letter he had just read: Redways, The Hinton, Hants.

He read the letters in the packet twice, thrice, before restoring them to the leather case. As he did so another small packet at the bottom of the case met his eye. He lifted it up. Two photographs and some newspaper cuttings fell out.

One was a photograph of a barren promontory beside a desolate sea, with numberless wooden crosses scattered among the dunes and tall sea-grass. Across this picture some words were written. They read: "Robert Lynn-garth buried here, March 10, 1915."

He gazed at the other picture longer. It was the portrait of a girl in a quaint costume of the stage. She was made up to depict a mouse, tail and paws complete, her dainty face peeping playfully out from a hood with pointed ears, her two hands held playfully beneath the chin in semblance of a mouse's paws. A dainty picture, poorly taken, but the unskilful photographer had not been able to rob the girl of her beauty, nor destroy the

wistful appeal of the eyes looking up at the face of the man now bent over them. The photograph was inscribed, in straggling and unformed writing, "To Dear Jim."

The yellow newspaper cuttings praised the bravery of Corporal James Raymond, Fourteenth Light Horse, at Gallipoli.

He returned these mementoes to the case thoughtfully, and remained motionless in the centre of the hut, his mind dwelling upon the strange event which had shattered his island peace. Through the doorway he could see the covered form of the dead seaman, who had been washed ashore. The body lay near the edge of the sea, with a large shag standing on one leg in the shallow water, regarding the corpse curiously. The bird, speckled head sunk upon breast, dark greenish eyes fixed sharply on the still outline beneath the coat, seemed to be meditating deeply upon the reason for its presence there. The man within the hut felt it was beyond the intelligence of any living creature to fathom that. There was some secret intention behind this apparent caprice of Chance not to be guessed or understood.

"How did this thing happen?" he asked aloud.

His eye dwelt on the corpse, which gave no sign. His thoughts swung round again.

Could one resurrect the past and begin again? That was the ceaseless desire of humanity through the ages: to put back the clock of Time and begin once more. If a door were opened—miraculously and incredibly opened—what then? Robert Lynngarth was dead and buried. He had been buried on a field of battle years ago. Why awaken him?

As he paced the hut in deep thought, his eye was caught by the sight of a slip of paper on the floor at his feet. He stooped and picked it up. It was a printed

strip, neatly pasted on a small white sheet. He bent over it and read:

"I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son."

He scanned the text with a faint and almost saturnine smile touching his grave eyes and lips. Not the Prodigal, but Lazarus! "He that was dead came forth." But was that wise? Did the living wish for the dead to return to life? Some might think they did, but how would they face the reality? Would the dead wish it themselves? Lazarus, now: how did he feel when that terrible command, "Come forth!" thundered into his tomb and pierced his dead ears. Did he start up joyfully, or creep out reluctantly, with longing backward glances at the place of his oblivion? Was his sisters' joy tempered with awe? Did he steal homeward in his loosened grave-clothes, gliding through the quiet streets like the ghost he was, straining dim eyes for his home, and knock? And what then? The inmates aroused from slumber, clutching each other, whispering, "That is Lazarus's knock. . . ."

He brooded over this picture, applying it to his own case. He had bought the peace of the grave at a terrible price. And now, in his living grave—tomb of his own seeking—the summons had reached him as it had reached Lazarus, destroying his sanctuary and beckoning him back to the world. A miracle had happened even greater than the raising of Lazarus. This thing, so incredible . . .

Again he walked to the door of the hut, but this time he did not look towards the dead messenger of Chance, lying serenely still, his mission accomplished. His glance ranged over the groups of insignificant rocky islets scattered southward in heaving water as far as he could see,

their uttermost pinnacles indistinct in shadow and veiled in flying foam. He knew the nearer ones as friends. It had been his diversion to name them with titles applicable and not dissonant—Rainbow Island, Babbling Island, Shadow Island, Breaksea Sound, The Island of Caves, Dusky Bay, Cape Albatross, Southward-Aye Group—such were some of them. His eye dwelt on them now, thoughtfully, lingeringly. In a sense they were dear to him, as representing part of his effort to reconstruct a broken life and gain peace in this desolate spot. There was one gaunt crag with three splintered peaks which he had called Calvary. He, too, had borne his cross to this place and found a measure of peace—the infinite restfulness of solitude and the calming whisper of the sea. Then why, having gained that much, should he leave it to take up a burden from which he had shaken himself free, and return to the sordid contact of civilized life, to its hypocrisies, treacheries, and perfidy?

“Come back, dear.”

He turned sharply as if a voice had whispered these words in his ear. In a tender, pleading murmur it reached him again, dying away in a faint sob . . . “Come back, my son.” He stood in a rapt attitude, listening.

Imagination! The island played tricks with the imagination. It was a place of mysterious sounds: faint echoes, sobbing whispers, and muffled calls. There was a petrel with a human note in its cry, long-drawn and plaintive; another which purred like a cat. Imagination, alas! And while he stood there dreaming his day's work was waiting to be done.

He lit the fire and fed the dog, but his own breakfast that morning was a scanty one. When the meal was finished he went down to the landing-place with a spade, and dug a grave in the shingle beach above high tide.

The dog sat on the mound of sand watching him, and the sea lapped on the shingle beach. When the grave was dug he wrapped the body of the dead sailor in some sack-ing he had brought from the hut, and buried it. Alone once more in his solitude, the digger of the grave stood for a moment looking out upon the empty sea. Then he turned away to set about his work. But that day his mind was on other things.

3

During the day the wind fell away, and by evening the sea was almost calm.

As dusk fell he climbed to his accustomed place on the brow of the cliffs, and stood motionless on the brink watching the sun go down.

How often had he seen night descend on the waters, bringing with it a stillness so profound that he felt like the one soul left alive on earth! How many nights had he lain awake in the hut listening to the breakers thundering against the obsidian cliffs. His days and nights went past in quick succession there, with little to mark their flight. In that solitary existence small things uplifted him. On calm nights he would stand for hours listening to the enticing grave murmur of the sea—a murmur which begged forgiveness for past treachery and future betrayals. The music and the solitude filled him with peace, profound and thoughtful, and uplifted him with a wondering exaltation which he did not seek to fathom. A single star, burning in the night above, brought him joy, and the birth of each day in the serene emptiness of his world came like the gentle rekindling of hope in a darkened spirit.

But this night was different. Outwardly, the scene

was unaltered: a dipping sun, moving waters, clouds of seabirds settling to rest. But he himself was changed. His soul was no longer at peace. A turmoil of feeling seethed within him, tinging the solemn and darkening solitude with something vaguely menacing. He was haunted by visions of the past, and assailed by the phantoms of his own unrest. His eyes dwelt on the familiar setting of sky and sea with a troubled glance—with a glance which was worldly. It was the look of a man marooned and abandoned.

The white albatross flew overhead. It was a rare and beautiful specimen of great size, so conspicuous in its perfect albinism that it could be distinguished among thousands—a white archangel of a bird. He had always watched for it hitherto, but this night it swept over unnoticed.

As he stood on the cliff edge in a reverie a ship appeared as though by magic on the dim and fading horizon—a toy shape in the immense background of sea and sky. He fixed his eyes upon it. The setting sun, shooting out a last trail of orange light, fell behind the rim of the horizon and silhouetted it like a boat cup of white paper; in reality, a steamer with a white funnel. The man on the cliffs knew it for the *Ascanius*, with the garrulous Captain Marquet in charge, making for his island with stores.

Standing there with shaded eyes, watching the steamer moving in the faint gleam through water which now showed purple in the coming night, the thought came to him quite suddenly that he must leave the island and return to England. Fate was stronger than human will, and ruled human destiny. No matter what the future held, he must go. The chance which had brought the letter to the island was winged by some unseen force which he did not care to withstand.

CHAPTER III

ENGLAND

HE stood outside the Mecca of all the wanderers of the earth, looking around him.

Charing Cross affects returned Englishmen differently. Such things are a matter of temperament. In the mind of the man known in another hemisphere as James Raymond, but whose steamer trunks were labelled Robert Lynngarth, the feeling was one of complete isolation. Never on his island had he felt so lonely. He stared at the throng of pedestrians rushing past. He wondered what was stirring in the imaginations hidden in that endless sea of pallid, care-worn faces. He wondered whether they were content with life—with their narrow, crowded lot. Perhaps the kingdom of adventure dwelt in their breasts like the kingdom of heaven. These droves of city and suburban dwellers might experience adventures infinitely more exciting and alluring than befell those who went in search of them.

No—that was too far-fetched. Londoners were too timid, too disciplined to law and order, to be lawless even in their dreams. Absurd to expect it! They were the product of their environment, as completely as a troop of blacks in a Papuan swamp were the product of theirs. Civilization and security—these things were devised for tame minds.

He continued to look about him with a listless air, like an incurious ghost freshly risen from the grave, with the feeling, indeed, that he had as little in common with these

people and their worldly preoccupations as a disembodied spirit. At that moment he recalled the island with regret. He pictured the waves lapping against the wrinkled cliffs, the seabirds soaring overhead. But here! His eye fell on a group of prosperous men, red-faced, gorged, talking with the fictitious geniality of good food and wine. It was evident they had been lunching well at their club. He had belonged to three clubs in the old days, twelve years ago. There were no clubs on Sanctuary Island, unless the penguins had one. They were certainly self-important and solemn enough to form clubs. They wore black and white suits too . . .

He laughed aloud at the notion. A policeman on duty near looked at him suspiciously, with obvious doubt on his face whether a man laughing in Charing Cross was a fool or a rogue. Robert Lynngarth flushed at his glance, beckoned a taxi-cab, and told the driver to take him to Waterloo.

In the recesses of the vehicle he savagely rated himself upon his folly. More accurately it might be said that James Raymond reproached Robert Lynngarth. Perhaps it was only fitting that a dual personality went with his two names. There was the reckless, impulsive and passionate Robert Lynngarth. That was the natural man, returning home unchanged after twelve years' absence. In Robert Lynngarth's saner moments he was controlled by a second and different being, cautious, worldly-wise, who regarded Robert Lynngarth's extravagances with cold disapproval. This was James Raymond, with twelve years' experience of the rough places of the earth. As a rule, the impulsiveness of the first outran the discretion of the second, as the man who now called himself Robert Lynngarth was aware to his cost.

He had returned to England on the previous day, and

now, after a short, rapid drive through crowded streets, he found himself in an empty first-class smoking compartment of a train at Waterloo, with a single ticket for Winchester in his pocket. He had left England as a boy of twenty-two and returned at thirty-four no richer than he went away, unless one could count memories as gain.

He was rich in those, at least: memories of islands, wild coasts, bold headlands, palm-tufted beaches, mangrove swamps, slow-winding rivers, sullen forests. These things he had seen, and others. The restlessness of life in southern seas was in his blood; strange pictures were painted on the back of his mind. He had been in most of those remote spots where white adventurers struggle for the capricious nods of Fortune. Broome, Thursday Island, New Guinea, the Malay Archipelago, and farther afield still. His mind roved over tropic climes, sunlit isles, strange nights. . . . Few men had gone farther and fared worse. He had tried his hand at many occupations. He had been gold-miner, pearl-fisher, lumberer, sailor, and other things. There was that business of the trading schooner. By Jove, he had chased some wild geese in his time.

And now he was back in England, rich in memories only, a hard-up wanderer in a land full of rich slugs on the wall. Migrant or slug, what did it matter in the long run, when all was said and done? He had returned to England for one purpose only and his stay would be brief. What had his broken life in common with the ordered human enterprise of his native land: that place of common sense, tenacity of effort, and ambitions? These things and their fruits were nothing to him—now. There was another memory, earlier still, which preyed on his mind like a gnawing pain. His brow darkened now as he thought of it. Was he wise to come back, and face that?

Like a querulous spectre it assailed him, reproaching him for his folly.

As the train was moving off a girl got in. He raised his eyes and took in her clear outline against the far window of the opposite seat. She was casting curious glances at him. He was a noticeable personality, though he was not aware of it. His tall figure, brown skin, blue eyes, widely opened as though staring into long distances, made up an appearance not ordinarily seen in an English train. Their glances met, and she dropped her eyes discreetly. He found himself speculating about her. Girls were girls, the wide world over. Glances from girls' eyes were the prelude of most adventures truly worth having, whether the eyes were deep and slumberous, like black pools, or frank English blue.

The girl by the window sat with her eyes demurely lowered on the pages of a book which she held in her gloved hand. He studied her covertly. There was something about her which brought up another memory, stirred another pale phantom of the past. He could not exactly define it; some subtle, intangible charm in the bent head, brown sheen of hair above a white neck, a glimpse of straight brows bent over the pages—these things reminded him of the girl dressed as a mouse, whose photograph he had destroyed before leaving the island. She had been one of the divinely foolish ones.

At the next station his fellow-passenger gathered together her belongings and got out. He was left alone for the remainder of the journey: left alone to brood, if he so desired. But for him, and not before it was time, the spell of memory was broken. He banished his troop of ghosts, and set himself to contemplate the concrete fact of his return after all these years, and the reception which awaited him.

There were taxi-cabs at the city of the Domesday Book, and a four-wheeler with an elderly driver leaning against a drooping horse in the shafts. The sight of a passenger among the taxi-cabs stirred the cabman into aggressive activity. He approached the prospective fare, whip in hand. His hoarse voice growled forth:

"Give the old horse a chance, sir."

Lynngarth looked hard at him. The cabman returned the look with one moist red eye.

"Do you know Hinton Hill?"

"Do I know the 'Intons? Afore you was born! Jump in, sir."

The cab rattled through the uneven grey streets, through the King's Gate, and into the country-side. At sober speed the horse traversed a typical Hampshire landscape—yew-bordered lanes, stone bridges spanning shallow streams, a tiny hamlet, and then a Saxon village with open green and a sundial in the centre of the street. Beyond the village the dusty highway, streaked with the shadows of the roadside trees, rose in slow ascent. The horse fell from an unwilling trot into a crawling walk. Half-way up the drive the cabman brought the horse to a standstill. He thrust his head through the window, and his voice was heard:

"This yere is 'Inton 'Ill."

The horse turned a weary head in pathetic appeal against dragging his broken knees farther up the hill.

"There's a footpath across those fields, I think."

"Private—no traspasers," responded the cabman gruffly. "Leads to Redways," he added, as an after-thought.

"Redways?"

"Sir Roger Lynngarth's place. He's the great man—hereabouts." His whip indicated a distant line of vener-

able yews, fringing a grey mansion with a high-pitched roof in a green curtain of trees.

“Very well. You can go back.”

The road from the top of the hill drooped into a sleepy valley, then curved uphill again. On his right hand meadows divided by hedges stretched to a little river with a wood on the farther side. A stile led from the road across the meadows, and he crossed over into the fields.

In a quarter of an hour he reached the woods, and plunged into their quiet depths like one accustomed to the way. Within it was dark and still; hanging branches veiled the light, his feet made no sound on the green path. He walked noiselessly on till the foliage thinned and the light fell through it, lessening the gloom. A patch of blue sky became visible, and then a larger break revealed, at the bottom of a slope some hundreds of yards away, the house he had seen from the road. Gaunt and dark it stood on the distant flat, the afternoon sun falling on it, glinting its narrow mullioned windows.

His view commanded the garden in front of the house, the ornamental park, everything far and near. He could even see the glowing colour of the flower-beds. As he looked a female figure appeared as if by magic in the garden, in the centre of the picture, as it were. At that distance he could just discern her, but a moment or two later she came into plain sight, walking quickly up the slope, a small dark frisking object—a dog—running at her heels.

He shrank back, hoping the dog would not discover him. She passed in front of his leafy screen. He remained unseen, but he saw her, a slight and slender shape, dressed in walking costume. Her face was hidden by a shady hat, but he noted her graceful figure, and the charming way in which she carried her little head.

He emerged cautiously from his concealment, looking after her. A little distance from where he stood, close to the edge of the wood, was a ruined abbey, a mere fragment of masonry strangled by ivy and other parasitical growths. It was a feature of the landscape which filled the eye without attracting it. The girl walked towards it, and entered by the low wooden door. She turned to look for her dog, and Lynngarth had a momentary glimpse of a girlish face, and a pair of eyes, dark and clear. Then she disappeared within the gap of the doorway.

"Who is she?" he murmured. "A visitor?" Then a thought flashed on him. "Can it be Lady Fibbets—Lady Fibbets, grown up, a woman?" he whispered.

He shook his head doubtfully, trying to discern her vanished figure in the dim recesses of the old abbey. It could not be. Yet something told him that it was.

Twelve years! It was his first confrontation with the visible transformation of time. With another backward glance at the abbey, he turned his steps resolutely down the slope in the direction of the house.

CHAPTER IV

REDWAYS

AT Redways the first leaves had fallen, but it was still very beautiful that late summer afternoon. The woods were flecked with orange, the tall elms were shedding gold, the skull-caps were blue on the banks of the river. Redways, in setting of park and garden, was an integral part of the general harmony, and stood that test. From the turn in the carriage drive where the trees thinned out the mansion was revealed at closer range, early Tudor undoubtedly, commingled with later styles, wonderful, gabled, mullioned, grey. The loveliness of grey Gothic in a setting of green and gold made you catch your breath and miss something disquieting about the house itself. Set in fair English woodland, mellowed by English sunshine—how could one be critical at first sight? You overlooked it also in the glory of the garden before the terraced front, encircled by grave hedges of clipped yew: an old garden of circular beds, pink and white borders, deep green lawns, ornamental clumps with peeping fauns, flagged paths, urns, an old sundial, and a central fishpond, filled by a spouting dolphin, held aloft by a bronze nymph chastely veiled around the middle in accordance with the moral standard of British art.

The trace of disquiet was there, nevertheless. If not immediately perceptible, it reached the seeing eye in the long run, conveying some remote impression of unbalanced design or distorted architecture—the impress of a fantas-

tic mind—which brooded over the old place like a shadow. It was not much: an unusual tilt in the high-pitched angles, gable windows glinting wickedly askew, a front elevation raised, the rear of the house sunk in hollow. What did these things mean, if a house is the expression of the designer's mind? Nature, unable to answer, had sought to cover the unrest, as far as she could reach, with her peaceful festooning. The gabled windows were deep in ivy; honeysuckle, cream and pink, covered the grey walls, and in the still scented air of the garden you forgot such things as an English winter and a sunless north front.

Inside, the suggestion of different periods was more apparent. The great staircase probably dated from the Restoration period. Inigo Jones was said to have had a hand in some of the later decorations, but that was merely tradition, although the work bore more than a trace of the master's design. Different owners at different periods had carried out remodelling and interior decorations—plenty of both. More recently, electric light, hot-water pipes, and other modern devices had made their appearance. They were like paint upon the cheek of an elderly beauty, with something of the same effect on the eye of the beholder. A semblance of tottering jauntiness did little to lessen the effect of time. The interior, fashioned in the days when good oak was plentiful in England, remained uncompromisingly Tudor—early Tudor at that—despite modern innovations, Elizabethan and Jacobean additions; sombre, certainly, but beautiful, with the rich dark texture and colouring of oak panelling, beamed ceilings, wood carving, and ancient fire-places.

The hall lacked the open Tudor roof, but the carved ceiling was an impressive substitute. It was a spacious apartment, very English, owing nothing to foreign work-

manship. In summer months the family had tea there. Three persons were assembled at the meal that late summer afternoon: Sir Roger Lynngarth, Lady Mercer, who was the sister of Sir Roger's deceased wife, and his old friend, Colonel Glenluce.

Tea was served and the servants gone, leaving the ground clear for discussion of an event which to these three people bordered on the miraculous.

"Isn't Stella coming down?" inquired Lady Mercer.

She glanced at Sir Roger, who shook his head.

"She is resting till dinner-time," he said.

"Mr. Stonnard—will he be in to tea?"

"He is too busy."

Lady Mercer glanced at a clock which was in the act of proclaiming the hour of four in an opulent silver chime.

"I wonder where Kathleen is?" she murmured.

She proceeded to pour out tea. Her brother-in-law bestowed upon her the darkened remote glance of a man whose mind was dwelling on other things. A political opponent had once described Sir Roger Lynngarth as a county magnate with a cold manner and a large rent roll. Like most generalizations, the definition did not go far enough. He was an English gentleman and great landowner, one of a type fast dying out, sufficiently wealthy to withstand the taxation which was crushing his class out of existence. He lived in a world of his own so removed from the modern outlook that it resembled the existence of a being on another planet. Yet his point of view was simplicity itself. Devotion to traditions of race and caste, coupled with Roman severity in upholding that standard of honour—such was his simple creed, yet one not only outside the comprehension of our common modern clay, but also so imperfectly appreciated

in his own family circle that his first wife died in awe of him, after thirty years' wedlock, without understanding him or his code.

He had political leanings (at the call of duty), a seat in the Commons, where he was rarely seen, and his influence in the county was paramount, so that party managers consulted him when a general election was in the air. The Coalition had his support on patriotic grounds, though he disapproved of it on the whole as a combination of intensive vulgarity, and hoped to see the Conservatives returned to power at the next general election. In which case a portfolio was awaiting him—but that was lobby gossip.

His seventieth year had sounded its solemn warning in his ear, but he had too many interests in this world to think of the next. Indeed, his second marriage to youth and beauty indicated that he by no means regarded his life as a dwindling concern. But, then, he was not a man who need feel any fear at the approach of death. Wealth and good blood, a patriot and strict Churchman—it is reasonable to assume that his footing was secure and his welcome assured, wherever he went in this world or the next.

He sipped his tea with preoccupied air; frail, upright, well preserved, carefully dressed; fine-featured in a severe way, with cold, dark eyes, undimmed by time, though glasses hung by a black silk ribbon from his neck. Austerity and aloofness were perceptible in the stillness of his pose, it needed sharp scrutiny to gain an indication of the current of thought beneath that stiffened exterior, though his courtesy was perfect, and his voice—when he spoke—low and gentle. Impossible to imagine him with a zest for anything—unless for honour. One thin hand rested on the tea-table as if carved in marble, a large dia-

mond on the little finger glittering in the light of the afternoon sun.

"It seems like a resurrection from the dead, Glenluce."

His soft, cold voice broke a lengthy silence. The reference was to the subject of their thoughts—the return of Sir Roger's only son after twelve years' absence from England.

Glenluce, tall, well-groomed, with a martial bearing and a single glass screwed into his right eye, nodded with sympathetic understanding.

"‘My son who was dead, and is alive again,’" he quoted gently.

"Roger appears to regard it more like the return of Lazarus," interposed Lady Mercer lightly.

Sir Roger Lynngarth received the remark with a frigid glance. Experience had taught him that expostulation was worse than useless where Annette was concerned. Ignoring her now, he again addressed himself to his old friend.

"Robert's return after this lapse of time has a certain awkwardness about it. He drops from the clouds with a letter by this morning's post. Twelve years' silence—and this. I can hardly realize it."

"Still—your only son," murmured Glenluce.

Sir Roger drew his thin lips together.

"Even so, he could have arranged his return in a different way," he said dryly. "As it is——" He changed his mind about finishing the sentence, and added in a different voice, "It is very like Robert, though."

"You might have wired to him," suggested Lady Mercer, "then written and explained everything before he came down. That would have been the best course, and spared every one's feelings."

"There was no address. I have already made that clear." Sir Roger spoke with controlled patience.

"No postmark?" asked Lady Mercer vaguely.

"One can hardly wire to a London postmark," said her brother-in-law. He turned again to Glenluce. "Robert has acted too impulsively. His letter has had a regrettable effect on my wife. It has quite upset her."

"I am sorry to hear it," said Glenluce sympathetically.

Lady Mercer, more robustly feminine, was less tender.

"There's no reason why Stella should be upset by the letter," she declared. "Undoubtedly it's an unfortunate coincidence, but Robert will feel the shock—the shock of his mother's death, I mean—most. Still, he has only himself to blame, dropping from the clouds, as Roger says, as though he'd been away for a few months, instead of twelve years. Anyone behaving like that must expect to be surprised. He must take things as they come. Time is not going to stand still for him, and twelve years is half a lifetime. People die and are forgotten in that time, and others marry again." Her glance rested on her brother-in-law's back. "Robert was always in trouble, acting on impulse. I dislike impulse, in men."

She nodded shrewdly again towards Sir Roger's back and passed Glenluce a second cup of tea with a hand beringed beyond the value of his year's income.

Lady Mercer had good blood and money—plenty of both, the former her patrimony, the latter her late husband's, a Scotch whisky peer. The distiller's widow was a dominating personality, full of worldly wisdom acquired in a half-century's experience of business, politics and finance. Her dreams were over, and she saw things clear. She was sixty, knew human nature, dressed extremely well, had a hook nose, a loud voice, and a habit

of saying exactly what she thought; which was the terror of her friends. But money made her independent of their good opinion, and respect for wealth enabled people to tolerate her frank speaking which would have been rudeness in moderate means and presumptuous insolence in poverty. Mixing with the great ones of the earth, she was behind the scenes in the game of high politics and international finance, and by a natural process of disillusionment had come to regard the world as a pack of fools ruled by a handful of rogues and hypocrites. With this moral outlook went a kindly heart which robbed her barbs of much of their sting—for understanding souls. She regarded the after-war generation as flabby, vulgar and foolish, but her nature drew amusement from a contemplation of its serious-minded young men who dabbled in psychoanalysis, and its emancipated girls who rode motorcycles.

Lady Mercer lived in London, but descended on Redways when it suited her. She was fond of Kathleen, Sir Roger's ward, and had views for the child. In his cold way her brother-in-law disliked his late wife's sister, but would have scorned to quarrel with her on that account. She was his relative, and had great wealth. Twin bucklers, these, in Sir Roger's eyes.

"After all, one must take life seriously," she went on. "Robert never did. In fact, he was quite reckless. The shock may be his salvation, if he hasn't changed."

Her eye rested on Sir Roger, but he did not lift his head.

Glenluce coughed softly, with the feeling that they were on delicate ground. He endeavoured to edge away from it.

"I agree with you, Lady Mercer," he said. "This letter is a mere temporary embarrassment—awkward and

sad for both Lady Lynngarth and Sir Roger's son—but a matter capable of adjustment or explanation in a few words."

A silence fell at this remark. They sat without speaking for some minutes. Then Sir Roger murmured, almost in a whisper.

"If it were only that!"

He checked himself like one betrayed by speaking a hidden thought aloud, but Lady Mercer heard him. She looked at him composedly.

"You mean why Robert left England in the first place?"

His glance reproved her and besought her silence, but she chose to ignore it.

"You and Robert quarrelled," she went on.

"That is not a matter I care to have discussed."

Sir Roger's glance held icy displeasure, but Lady Mercer was not to be stopped.

"Robert left Redways afterwards and never returned. I was staying here at the time, you know. I'm still in the dark about what happened, or whether that's what kept Robert out of England all these years. I suppose some boyish escapade was at the bottom of it, if the truth were known. Robert always had a weakness for a pretty face, but that's no great sin in a place like England, where there are more than enough girls to go round. You always overdid the part of the stern parent, Roger. I hope you do not meditate keeping it up, after all these years. Forgive and forget—if there's anything to forgive—and let sleeping dogs lie."

An opening door interrupted her. The butler entered with noiseless steps, letters on salver, which he brought to the master of the house. Sir Roger opened one, and put the rest aside.

The functionary waited; a figure of complete immobility, clean-shaven, with a touch of side-whisker, a typical country butler—nothing more, unless you were curious enough to glance at the ferret eyes now veiled by heavy lids. They suggested a disposition not in accord with the sleek demure exterior, or physiognomists erred. Sir Roger was not a physiognomist, and, even if he had been, was not likely to have bothered about his butler's eyes.

"Tell Mr. Stonnard I should like to see him," he said, when he had finished perusing the letter.

The butler bowed, and added the information:

"Mr. and Mrs. Horbury have just arrived, Sir Roger."

"I'd forgotten them," said Sir Roger blankly.

"Send in some more tea, Jauncey," said Lady Mercer.

The butler bowed again, and departed.

Mrs. Horbury was Sir Roger's only sister, who had ended a tempestuous girlhood by eloping with a Whitehall clerk who had less than a thousand a year. The couple were now working out their repentance in a small house at Putney, with a large young family. Mindful of his duties as a brother and a Christian gentleman, Sir Roger assisted them, and occasionally had them down to Redways for a week-end on the understanding that the large young family were left behind. The Murillo in the hall still bore the mark where one of the hopefuls had endeavoured to thrust an inquiring finger through the eye. Sir Roger believed in large families for England's greatness, but not at the expense of his Murillos.

Stonnard, the secretary, appeared on the wings of speed. Slight, fair, and sandy-haired, he had been endowed at birth with a pair of wistful violet eyes, which were more in keeping with the heroine of an emotional

novel than a private secretary with political ambitions. A slight tendency to early baldness did not lessen the anomaly. But he was clever, well-mannered, an excellent secretary, and efficient. Moreover, he was of good family. For these things his employer liked him. Sir Roger now handed him the letter.

"You might telephone to Frampton about this, Stonnard. Tell him"—he hesitated slightly—"unforeseen circumstances will prevent my attending the meeting tomorrow night."

"Will you have some tea, Mr. Stonnard?" Lady Mercer placed a hand on the teapot. She also liked her brother's secretary. She thought he was bound to "get on." "There will be some fresh tea coming," she added.

"None for me, thanks, Lady Mercer. I've a ton of work to get through before dinner."

A moment or two after his departure a tall deep-bosomed lady with a high complexion swept into the room and kissed Sir Roger's cold cheek effusively. This was Mrs. Horbury, Sir Roger's sister. In her wake came her husband, a small slight man with a stoop, fair hair, and weak eyes, who shook hands all round.

"I've heard the news," Mrs. Horbury exclaimed. "Mr. Stonnard has just told me. Amazing, incredible. I'm all in a whirl. Has Robert arrived yet?"

Her brother shook his head.

"We came by an early train to lunch with the Porters at Winchester. The loss of her daughter has been a frightful blow to Lucy, but she's getting over it. But tell me, Roger, how do you feel about Robert's return. You know I never really believed in my secret heart that he was dead. And now he's back again! Well, that only proves—what does it prove?"

"That the age of miracles is not past for one thing," said Lady Mercer.

"True," said Mrs. Horbury, stirring her tea. "I wonder where he's been, and if he's changed much? Where are Stella and Kathleen?"

Lady Mercer vouchsafed the information that Lady Lynngarth had a bad head and that Kathleen had gone out after lunch. Mrs. Horbury nodded.

"Kathleen was always mad on open air," she said. The headache passed without comment. She went on with her tea, talking incessantly.

Lady Mercer listened indifferently, Sir Roger lent an abstracted ear, Glenluce adjusted his eyeglass and turned over the pages of a magazine. Mr. Horbury, always ill at ease among the great ones of Redways, sat meekly upright, his mild blue eyes blinking deferentially in the direction of his august brother-in-law.

Time passed. Sir Roger grew fidgety, nervous even. That was apparent to Lady Mercer's bright, cold eye. She knew how he must feel, and seized the opportunity of a pause in Mrs. Horbury's talk to exclaim at the lateness of the hour. The silver-faced timepiece indicated five o'clock. Lady Mercer rose and shook out her skirts.

"I shall go and rest till dinner-time," she said, and left the room.

Mrs. Horbury followed suit, drawing her husband after her with one of those imperious gestures which women reserve for some husbands. Mr. Horbury, who had a taste for mechanics and had been occupying his leisure for the last quarter of an hour tinkering at his watch in an incompetent helpless fashion, rose in obedience to the summons. He went out gently, closing the door behind him.

When they were gone the two friends sat without speaking. Sir Roger's face revealed marks of unusual perturbation. Glenluce thought he understood his agitation, and respected it. Sir Roger glanced restlessly at his watch once or twice, then rose and stood by the mantelpiece, his arm resting upon it. He broke the lengthy silence.

"He may be here any moment now."

"You have sent the car to meet the afternoon train, I suppose?" inquired Glenluce casually.

"I have not," responded the other with exceeding dryness. Glenluce's face expressed such astonishment that he hastened to add: "Robert did not choose to say which train he would travel by. In any case, he is not coming to see me. He has chosen to ignore my wishes even in this visit, as he always has."

He took a turn or two along the carpet, came to a full stop, and exclaimed:

"As always, he is doing this to please himself."

Glenluce looked keenly at his friend. It was dawning on him that he was not looking forward to his son's return with the joy he might have been expected to feel, in spite of the quarrel to which Lady Mercer had referred. That was a state of affairs best met by discreet silence, so Glenluce held his tongue.

"This comes as a great shock to me—after twelve years," the elder man continued. "There are circumstances—reasons—why Robert should have sought my advice before returning. All things considered, it would have been better for him to remain silent, or, at least, to stay out of England."

There was an agitation in the cold voice of the speaker which caused Glenluce to look at him with a deeper and more penetrating glance. He gathered that young

Lynngarth had disappeared from England under some sort of cloud. He remembered there had been surmises and raised eyebrows in Society at the time. The facts were not known, but no one believed the story of the African big-game hunt so carefully circulated. Besides, Robert Lynngarth never came back—just dropped out of things, and was forgotten. That was long ago—long before Glenluce's own political appointment to the Home Office. He had not known Sir Roger so intimately in those days, and if he had he would not have dreamed of questioning him about his son's strange disappearance.

"You do not know why my son left England?"

"No; how should I know?"

"I thought—I wondered—whether some hint, a whisper, had reached you." Sir Roger brought this out with slow and laboured utterance, watching the other narrowly.

"No; nothing."

"I feel that I ought to tell you."

"I would rather not know," said Glenluce. "Why should you stir up this story of your son's past, whatever it is, if he is returning to resume his place in the world as your heir?"

"He cannot do that." Sir Roger's eyes had a goaded look. "I need your advice, your help."

Glenluce's hesitation might have been taken as tacit permission to proceed. Sir Roger so interpreted it.

"When Robert went away——"

Glenluce made a quick gesture. "One moment. Are you seeking my help as a friend or in my official capacity?"

"Let us say both," said the other with a slight frown.

"Then I'd rather you kept your own counsel, my dear Lynngarth," said Glenluce candidly. "Besides, your

son's past, whatever it is, is his secret, not yours, to confide."

"It depends upon what the secret it," rejoined Sir Roger in a voice barely above a whisper.

"Please do not place me in an awkward situation by confiding it to me, whatever it is." Glenluce softened his refusal with a friendly smile, which found no reflection in Sir Roger's stern white face.

Another silence fell upon them, occupied by Glenluce in the effort to shape some retreat from an awkward situation. But Sir Roger had no more to say. Unused to rebuffs, his pride was angered, his tongue curbed, his unwonted weakness icily repressed. He had gone back into his shell. He stood against the mantelpiece in stiffened poise, affronted dignity in every line.

Glenluce leant against the window looking out upon the garden and the scene beyond. White butterflies dropped over purple scented beds, an insect host floated on filmy wings above the lilies of the pond, small birds hopped in pertest ease among the shady yews. Outside the blaze of colour the country-side stretched in summer peace: woods, meadows freckled pink and white, a quiet stretch of river, farm-houses, haystacks bronzed in afternoon sun.

Along the sweep of pasture-land a man was making his way—a tall figure with an easy swinging carriage, looking leisurely around him as he walked. He crossed the park in the direction of the house, disappeared in a clump of trees, then reappeared in the broad curve of the drive. Next moment Glenluce saw him entering the garden.

The watcher within scanned him attentively, but could not see his face. He walked with bent head, carrying a small case, and seemed in no hurry to reach the house.

Reach it he did, at length. The observer behind the window curtains made sure on that point before he turned to the motionless figure by the mantelpiece, and said in a gentle voice:

“Some one has just come through the garden. I fancy it is your son.”

Sir Roger made no reply, but started slightly a moment later at the sound of a footstep outside. The door opened and Jauncey approached the master of the house with discreet deliberation. His voice was heard.

“Mr. Lynngarth has arrived, Sir Roger. I have shown him to the Painted Room as you desired.”

CHAPTER V

FATHER AND SON

THE smart maid who opened the door eyed him with the intrepid glance of pert girlhood, but the invaluable Jauncey, waiting within ear-shot for the sound of the bell, advanced with stately grace to take charge of the situation. The girl vanished in response to his almost imperceptible gesture, and the butler confronted the tall figure on the door-step with suave dignity.

“Mr. Lynngarth? Will you be so good as to allow me to show you into the study, sir?”

Robert followed him across the hall and down a corridor. The passage with the dark room at the end of it seemed familiar as the setting of a remembered dream. The butler opened the door and stood aside for him to enter.

“I will tell Sir Roger, sir.”

He retreated from the doorway with an austere bow. Robert stood in the middle of the room into which he had been admitted, looking around him. It was his father’s sanctum, where he made up his accounts and transacted his business affairs, a gloomy apartment massively furnished in mahogany, book-lined shelves, a large bureau, and oak-framed pictures hanging on the darkly papered walls. It was the room in which their last interview had taken place twelve years before.

How well he remembered it! How everything came back to him at that moment! Not a thing had been changed. The Painted Room, as it was called, because of

the painted allegorical panels let into the walls and ceiling—panels of unknown antiquity, carried out with a kind of savage decorative sense, as though the designers were actuated by the desire to impress stern moral lessons on those who occupied the room. Those panels had terrified him as a child, and haunted his infant dreams. They seemed terrifying even now, these conceptions of dead men who had looked with horror on the world and the flesh, and had sought to warn their generation of the futility of this life below. There was one in particular which had frightened Robert as a child, and his eye turned to it now. It covered the space above the mantelpiece, and depicted a dark landscape ravaged by a thunderstorm which had split the surface of the earth in twain. Into this chasm a multitude of naked people were plunging distractedly. From the clouds above a clenched fist protruded grasping forked lightning, and the scene was dominated by a large eye, which glared from a white space above the clouds with an expression of freezing malevolence.

There was no escaping the Eye. The artist had aimed at omnipotence in depicting it, and had succeeded. It dominated the room as well as the picture, watching every one with sleepless vigilance. Ever since Robert could remember, the Eye had brooded ferociously over the mantelpiece, seeing all things, staring people out of countenance, prying into the minds, reckoning them up, weighing them in the balance and finding them wanting. Its gaze fitted the rigour of the text which appeared at the foot of the picture:

“Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee.”

It watched Robert now as it had watched him in former days when he was shut in the room by his father for

punishment, alone with the Eye; it seemed to disapprove of him now, as it had disapproved of him then.

The door behind him opened, and Robert Lynngarth turned to greet the one who entered.

“Father!”

“Well, Robert?”

Robert strode impulsively forward, but the elder man remained where he stood, looking at his son with a straight, cold glance. There was little welcome in the voice which extended that brief greeting to a son returned after twelve years’ absence, but there was astonishment in the look Sir Roger bestowed upon him.

“You have changed,” he said at length, “greatly changed.”

They regarded each other in silence, trying to renew the past with the eyes of the present. Their last interview in that room, twelve years before, was in the minds of both.

“Sit down, Robert,” said Sir Roger, in a different tone. “I wished to see you alone before you meet—the others.”

Robert took a chair, glancing covertly at his father. But Sir Roger was not looking at him. He remained standing, with a preoccupied face, fumbling with the narrow silk ribbon from which his pince-nez dangled.

“I wish you had let me know of your intention to return to England,” he remarked at last.

“I should have done so, I know,” his son replied, in a low voice.

“We believed you dead,” returned the other. “You have allowed us to remain under that belief for all these years. Now you suddenly return, without a word of warning.”

“I wrote to my mother.”

Sir Roger turned a strange glance on him.

"You should have written to me," he said. "That was your plain duty. You have acted inconsiderately, though that is nothing new. Impulse, always impulse! Have you not learnt yet to control your feelings? You stayed away and remained silent for twelve years to please yourself, and in the same capricious spirit you break your silence and return without a word of warning. You, who should not be in England at all!"

Robert turned pale, and rose to his feet. "I came back from caprice, as you say," he coldly remarked. "But I came for one purpose only—to see my mother again. I received an appeal from her—an appeal which reached me in the strangest way—a summons which I dared not disobey. My visit will be a brief one—I assure you that."

He looked at his father a little wistfully, but there was no reply.

"I presume you will not prevent my seeing her——"

The elder man interrupted him swiftly.

"I have bad news for you."

"What is it?"

Again no reply was forthcoming, but Robert saw tears in his father's eyes, and the hand which fumbled with the silk ribbon was trembling. A realization of the truth swept over him like a cold wind.

"Father!" he cried. "What is it? Tell me!"

"Your mother died five years ago," said Sir Roger solemnly.

His father's tears had prepared him for it, but the information, thus announced, reached him with an added poignancy. The years, the all-devouring years, had stolen his mother from him. That gracious being with the tender eyes and gentle ways had been swept away by

inexorable time. She had gone as though she had never existed, leaving nothing but a memory behind. It gave him a suffocating sense of the malignity of existence. The black wings of death seemed to be beating about his own ears. He had difficulty in collecting his thoughts. His glance wandered round the room, and encountered the Eye above the mantelpiece. The Eye dwelt on him coldly, as though searching his inmost thoughts.

"This must come as a tremendous shock to you, Robert."

His father's voice reached him from a distance. Sir Roger crossed to him and laid a hand lightly on his shoulder. There was an abnegation of self in that gesture, the outcome of a religious faith which bade Sir Roger comfort a stricken soul. For the moment at least, the Prodigal Son was forgiven. "Your return, your letter to her, have opened a wound that was almost healed. Her illness was very sudden—and unexpected. She suffered. Everything possible was done, but it was hopeless from the first. She spoke of you in her last illness. Frequently. She begged me to forgive you. She thought you were still alive, although you had never written. I told her I had forgiven you, and that I would endeavour to find you. She died happy in that assurance."

Sir Roger's voice shook slightly as he uttered these words. His emotion was stirred at his own fine part in that death-scene: at his nobleness in exercising the divine quality of forgiveness in order to send a dying soul rejoicing into the dark unknown.

Robert crossed the room to the French window, which looked out on a lawn. Beyond was the garden, full of massed and nodding blooms, with butterflies floating around them like mere specks of brilliant colour in the

clear light. His eyes rested on these things without seeing them. His father's voice broke into his reverie:

"Your letter was received this morning. I would have spared you this if you had written sooner."

"I wrote from Auckland—in the first place," said the son, turning round.

"The earlier letter was not received."

"I posted it myself," murmured the other.

"It is strange that it should have gone astray." Sir Roger spoke coldly. It was evident that the moment of his emotion had passed, as all such moments do. "You have not yet told me how you came to return to England. It was injudicious on your part, to say the least. I gave you up for dead years ago, although I continued your mother's advertisements for some months after she died because of my promise to her."

"The advertisement reached me."

"The advertisement did not invite you to return to England," Sir Roger quickly remarked. "Besides, that was some years ago. If this is the reason which induced you to return——"

"I saw the advertisement two months ago," his son interrupted. "That alone would certainly not have brought me back. There was another reason—a letter from my mother. It came to me strangely. Shall I tell you?"

Sir Roger listened to the story in silence. He could hardly believe it. It seemed too improbable for sober credence. The sight of the sea-stained letter which his son produced from his pocket-book did not cause him to alter his opinion.

"It was a summons I had to obey," said the younger man, in a low voice.

"It would have been better if you had acted with less

impulse," his father dryly rejoined. "As you chose to remain silent for twelve years, you should have communicated with my solicitors or myself before returning. Then you would have learnt the truth and been spared all this. Personally, I should have preferred to make you a suitable allowance, conditionally, of course, upon your remaining out of England. There have been changes—other changes."

He paused abruptly with a growing feeling of irritation against this scapegrace son, who dropped out the clouds after twelve years' absence, expecting to find things exactly as he had left them. Sir Roger had long been a stranger to embarrassment, though in that room many humbler folk had stood embarrassed in his august presence. But at that moment he had the feeling of one forced to discuss most intimate family affairs with a complete stranger. That unwonted state of mind he attributed to his difficulty in reconciling the memory of the fair-haired boy from whom he had parted in bitter anger twelve years before with the tall bronzed man, who now regarded him sadly.

"What other changes?" Robert picked up his father's last remark quickly, with a note of alarm in his voice. "Is there any more bad news? Has anything happened to Kathleen?"

"Kathleen is quite well and happy."

"Is she married?" asked Robert, struck by a sudden thought.

"She is not married, nor likely to be—yet. She is a modern girl, and does not approve of marriage as the sole outlet of a woman's energies. She thinks of a career for herself."

Another disillusionment! Robert found it difficult to visualize Lady Fibbets as grown up and modern, taking

herself so seriously as to denounce marriage as an institution.

"The other change of which I spoke is that I've married again."

"Oh!" said his son in surprise. "You have married again?"

He looked at his father blankly. Sir Roger's own eyes strayed from his son's face to a distant small table which stood near his bureau. Robert's eyes involuntarily followed his father's glance. In former years a photograph of his mother had always been on that table, with a bowl of fresh flowers beside it. There was a bowl of flowers now freshly plucked, but the small frame which had held his mother's picture was replaced by a large modern one.

A change came over Robert's expression as he caught sight of this hitherto unnoticed picture. Its presence in that sacred spot seemed to startle him. He walked across to the table and looked at it. His profound scrutiny lasted so long that Sir Roger found himself absurdly anxious to get a glimpse of his son's face, like a man waiting for a verdict. It was as though something incalculably momentous to himself was involved in his son's contemplation of the photograph.

Robert put the photograph back on the table with a sharp intake of the breath, and looked round. His father could gather nothing from his expression.

"Who is this girl, father?"

The sound of these words touched some hidden spring of irritation in Sir Roger's breast. He looked up angrily, but his son's face was as expressionless as though hidden behind a vizor.

"That is my present wife," he said solemnly.

Robert looked attentively at his father's ageing face

and whitening hair, as if examining the lineaments of a stranger. His father was married again, and to the girl in the silver frame. He sighed wearily, like a man turning over some tremendous moral problem. His eyes again turned inquisitively to the wistful face in the frame, as though seeking the solution there.

"Where did you first meet your present wife, father?" he asked.

Sir Roger chose to see an element of mockery in the other's glance. Bitter anger filled him at the thought that his son should descend upon him after all these years, like a black phantom of the past, and presume to sit in judgment on his acts. But he restrained his anger.

"I met my wife during the war, in France," he coldly explained. "She was a nurse at one of the base hospitals. She is some years younger than myself, though I am not conscious of the difference. I feel younger than my years. I have always taken care of myself and led a proper life. No excess of any kind—except excess of work." Sir Roger uttered these last words with manifest approbation for a life of sterling conduct.

Robert lifted his head and looked at him.

"Why did you marry again?"

Sir Roger was penetrated with the uneasy feeling that his son's attitude was not in keeping with one who had sinned before heaven and in his sight. In the parable the son returned home in the humblest spirit, and accepted his portion of fatted calf with the becoming meekness of a penitent sinner. There was no suggestion that he cross-questioned his father about his own conduct during his absence. Sir Roger deemed it due to himself to live up to the traditional virtue of the Prodigal's father by remaining calm. But he spoke with dignity:

"That is a question you have no right to ask, Robert."

"Perhaps not. I beg your pardon, father. This news has come as a tremendous shock to me."

He got up from his chair again and paced restlessly about the room. Sir Roger watched him in silence and some inward perturbation. At that moment his son conveyed to him a regrettable impression of some untamed animal; brown-skinned, tanned, with the whites of his eyes showing as he glanced about him obliquely. There was something disconcerting in that sidelong look, a kind of impatience, contempt, perhaps; the unconscious revelation of a rebellious mind which views with derision all things civilized.

He waited for a space, but the younger man made no sound. The silence grew tense.

"My second marriage was no hasty decision on my part, Robert."

His son stopped short with an exclamation which startled him.

"I wish now that I had never returned to England," he said passionately.

"I also share that wish," responded his father mildly. "But it is useless talking in that strain—now that you are back."

"That is a mistake which can be very easily remedied," said Robert, turning towards the door as he spoke.

"What are you going to do?"

"Go away as soon as possible. But I should like to see Kathleen first."

"You cannot leave the house in this way. As you have chosen to return, you must stay."

"Why?"

"Remember your position. It would have been infinitely better if you had not returned; but, now that you are back, you must think of me. The servants know that

you are here, and servants are prone to gossip. If you disappear again too quickly, you will set afoot surmise and suspicion."

"Suspicion?"

"Suspicion—if not worse," replied Sir Roger significantly. "The mere fact of your reappearance in this house is a remarkable circumstance, which will start the tongues of all Hampshire wagging. Your second disappearance would be infinitely worse, for me, who would have to bear the brunt of any inquiries. You must remain—for the present, at all events."

Robert gave a hopeless shrug of resignation.

"Very well," he said, "but for my part I would sooner go at once."

"It is getting on for dinner-time," said his father, glancing at his watch. "We had better dress. You can tell me this evening what you have been doing all these years."

He uttered these words in a more friendly tone than he had yet used, and touched the bell as he spoke. It was answered by the maid who had opened the door to Robert on his arrival.

"Show Mr. Lynngarth to his room," he said.

CHAPTER VI

THE STAIRCASE

THE bedroom was grave and restrained, sheathed in soft grained wood, instead of oak, the ceiling painted with angels who looked down on him with sad faces. The Angel Room! Why had they put him there? Did they think he needed a guardian angel? Truly, he did; every man did.

He slowly dressed for dinner in the waning light. Beneath the high and narrow windows stretched the quiet country-side, the fields where the rooks were trailing home, the river gleaming like old hammered silver in the last rays of the sun. These things were familiar enough to him, and the anticipation of seeing them again had haunted his homeward dreams. But now?

His eye rested on the black yew encircling the little churchyard where his mother was sleeping, a stranger to the doubts and fears which filled his breast. Her letter had recalled him. How he regretted now that it had reached his island! Why had Fate done this thing? What was the purpose behind it? Better far to have left him as dead than send him this poignant and useless summons from the grave.

If that, being bad, had been the worst! But it was only half the ghastly trick. A ghastly trick? Incredible, monstrous? What was he to do?

He stood like a figure carved in stone, staring before him as if at something visible to himself alone, one hand held outward—stiffened, as it were, in some involuntary gesture of protest, or even despair.

He was aroused from that attitude by the sobbing of a woman. It fell on his startled ears with disconcerting suddenness, so close that it might have been in the darkening room, reaching him in mournful cadence like some minor chord of Tschaikowsky.

Robert walked to the door and opened it. Outside was a dim and empty corridor, with shut doors on each side, stretching a carpeted way to the head of the staircase, where between black velvet curtains a marble figure of Echo held a light in uplifted hand. The light revealed her turned head and rapt face, marble finger against marble lip, as though she, too, had heard the sobbing and entreated the silence of the man now looking out of his door. But the sound had ceased. Robert stood for some moments in the open door-way, listening.

Puzzling over this incident, he closed the door behind him, and walked towards the head of the staircase. The silence was absolute, broken only by the soft padding of his shoes on the velvet carpet. His way was haunted by the oddest feeling that a pair of unseen eyes rested upon him and followed his movements. He turned sharply more than once, but was confronted by nothing but a dim, empty corridor, with a twin row of shut doors, blank as the faces of the dead.

An electric switch near the curtains caught his eye. He pressed it, and the corridor leapt into soft light from end to end. Empty of course. He knew that already. Above him poised Echo, with alert and listening head. Her raised finger seemed to bespeak his attention for something her rigid lips could not reveal. Wonderingly he followed the direction of the nymph's gaze down the passage, then turned impatiently away.

"Fancy," he muttered. "Pure fancy. I've lived too much alone." He went on his way downstairs.

The great hall was empty. A light or two glowed at intervals. Not many. There is a fitness in these things for old Tudor halls. A silver clock softly proclaimed the half-hour—the half-hour after seven. He was early—everybody was still upstairs dressing for dinner. Eight o'clock was the hour for dinner at Redways.

Robert stationed himself in front of the open fire-place, glancing leisurely around the hall. There was still plenty of daylight outside, but it was almost dark within. His eye marked everything: the carved over-mantel, the heavy oak beams, plaster frieze, dark ceiling, with curious little pendants, the panels bearing Queen Elizabeth's arms, supported by lion and griffin. Nothing changed.

His glance rested on the great staircase—the famous staircase which drew connoisseurs from distant parts; so magnificent that Redways might have been built for no other purpose than to house it, if it had not been of later date than the house. Late Stuart, with balustrades of solid oak covered with foliage and figures; a woodland saturnalia full of marvellous little creatures, nymphs and satyrs, birds and animals, all carved with the same wonderful skill. The origin of the carvings was doubtful, but they were supposed to be the work of Flemish woodcarvers who flocked to England when Charles II came to the throne. Certainly these scenes of leafy amorousness, half-hidden, half-revealed, were a florid flower of genius which had never flourished in English handicraft. It is not the English way to make such a tremendous business of sex as was revealed by those grim unending pursuits of naked nymphs. Echo above might well turn her head in feminine impatience from fleeing damsels who had run for hundreds of years without ever allowing themselves to be overtaken.

The staircase rose in a broad, straight flight to a

landing, then branched into two narrower flights which spiraled upwards to the right and left wings of the house.

As a boy, Robert had often stood at the foot of the staircase, waiting for his mother to descend. He loved to see her coming down, generally in black, with beautiful white arms and fair hair, her eyes dwelling with a tender light on the little boy at the foot, staring up at her gravely. He never ran up to meet her. To his childish mind that would have marred the beauty of the spectacle which began with the opening of her door high overhead. There was always something mysterious about her progress along the narrower gallery which corkscrewed down; first invisible, then partly seen, finally emerging into full view from the sharp turn which led into the broad final flight.

Shadows! In his island dreams he had seen her thus, as he would never see her again. She had sent for him, and he had returned at her bidding, but she had not waited for him. She had descended, white as snow, into the place where every human soul was bound. The victorious grave had swallowed her. Shadows!

A familiar sound above his head reached his ears. He started slightly. It was the opening of the door which had once been hers. He would have known that peculiar, slightly dragging sound among a thousand doors. He stood still in the attitude of bygone years, one foot on the bottom stair, looking up expectantly. He hardly knew what he expected to see—his mother walking lightly and gracefully, looking down at him tenderly, a shadowy figure in the gloaming, but real, with the tender light in her eyes? Yes, he could have understood that, nor would it have surprised him very much. But her ghost? No. The old house might well harbour ghosts, but her gracious, gentle spirit would never haunt it—not now!

He checked this fanciful feeling with an effort. Somebody was coming down—some one of flesh and blood. He heard the rustle of a silk dress, the fall of a light and hurried footstep. He had a momentary vision of a beautiful face, gazing down at him. Looking upward, he caught the flash of a pair of tearful eyes, and then he understood.

His face hardened. This was the other wife; the girl whose photograph he had seen on the table in his father's study. There was silence overhead, as if his father's wife had paused, startled, at the sight of the uplifted grim brown face. Then the footfalls descended again, but more slowly.

He stood waiting.

She came into view where the naked arm of Echo thrust forth a cluster of lights to guide her down. Even at that distance Robert Lynngarth was penetrated by the mysterious indefinable charm of her personality; a charm which radiated from her beautiful form like a fragrance, compelling yet elusive, subtle yet provocatively feminine. She descended slowly, as if unwilling to complete the last short journey which would bring her to where he was standing. Her white shod feet hesitated on the crimson staircase carpet, and her eyes were downcast. She came down step by step, reluctantly. The expression of her beautiful face was enigmatic, but above the graceful lines of her blue silk evening dress her breast moved in quick agitation. Her hands were clasped nervously before her. Robert Lynngarth gazed at her, fascinated. His eyes took her in: her fair, bent head, her delicate features, the supple, graceful lines of her girlish figure, the unspoken supplication of that silent approach.

She lifted her head as she reached the foot of the stairs and met his gaze. Her own widened glance was at once

appealing and terrified. She approached him with her eyes fixed on his face.

"Jim," she breathed.

"Is it really you, then?" he said.

"Yes," she panted, with a quick glance around her. "Your letter was given—to me." Her eyes fell involuntarily. "I thought I knew the handwriting, but I was not sure. It seemed too impossible, too dreadful to be true."

"Life can play more monstrous tricks than this," he muttered, almost to himself.

"Jim!" She crept a little closer to him and took his unresponsive hand with wistful fingers. "Jim! To see you again—to speak to you! How often have I sobbed myself to sleep thinking of you. Why did you not write to me?"

He drew back. "To what purpose?" he asked coldly.

A slight weary movement of her beautiful head seemed to indicate acquiescence in that. She came closer.

"I placed the photograph there, Jim—where you saw it."

"To put me on my guard? You certainly succeeded."

"I have spent a terrible day," she whispered. "I was terrified—I did not know what to do. I would have telegraphed if I had known your address. I saw you come. I've been waiting to see you alone. I was going to your room, but I was too afraid."

"I'm glad you did not attempt to do anything so foolish," he rejoined.

"Yes, it would have been foolish. But, Jim——"

"What is it?"

"You will not say anything?"

"You need not have asked that question." His tone

was cold. "I shall certainly say nothing about the past—for my own sake, as well as yours."

"I wasn't thinking about you, Jim," she hurriedly rejoined.

"You must not call me Jim," he interrupted. "You had better get into the way of regarding me as Robert Lynngarth, your stepson. A remarkable relationship, truly, considering all things."

She flinched as if from a blow, and flushed. Her wistful mouth trembled.

"Don't be unkind, Jim," she murmured hurriedly. "If I had only known—if I could have guessed. Jim, we must meet alone, and I will tell you everything."

"Better not. That would only attract attention. I shall not be here long—now that I know this. It is foolish for us to be talking here together."

"But I must see you, Jim. I am in great trouble."

The sound of a gently opening door caused Robert Lynngarth to move a step away from the beautiful face so near his own. His father's wife stood extremely still, like a statue. Jauncey made a noiseless appearance in the distance, moving towards the dining-room as though propelled by some mechanism superior to legs. He carried a corkscrew in his hand, and his florid face was preoccupied with the heavy responsibility of dinner. With careful obviousness his eyes ignored the pair by the staircase, and his ears looked such models of discretion that it seemed impossible to credit them with the guilt of overhearing anything of the conversation which his entrance had interrupted.

He went on his way, and his irreproachable back vanished through the opposite door.

At the same moment Lady Mercer appeared, coming

leisurely downstairs. She reached where they were standing, and scanned Robert through her glasses.

"Well, Robert," she said, after a prolonged scrutiny, "you've changed. You're your mother's boy, though. Poor Julia!" She approached closer and kissed him. "I'm sorry for you Robert, but it's a pity you did not come back sooner."

He remained silent.

"There are only two ways of going through life," she continued. "You either take it seriously, or you do not. Your misfortune is that you never did take it seriously."

"Sometimes I think I've taken it too seriously," he murmured with a half-smile.

"You mean you've taken yourself seriously—not life," she replied. "That's a common enough attitude in these days. You have been making Stella's acquaintance, I see."

Lady Lynngarth looked at her. "I found—Robert here alone when I came down a few minutes ago, and I made myself known," she said shyly.

"Quite right." Lady Mercer gave another of her quick, shrewd glances at Robert's guarded face. "You'll have to get used to having a stepmother young enough to be your own wife, Robert." He started perceptibly at the sally. She went on: "Not that these things matter much nowadays. We've abolished old age in England since the war. Nowadays, grandmothers dress like flappers, and flappers know more than their grandmothers. Have you seen Kathleen, Robert?"

"Not yet."

"You'll find her changed. She was quite a small girl when you went away. Now she's grown up, and prides herself on being modern. Modern! It's only a pose of

course. No woman knows the meaning of the word, and nobody could be modern in a place like Hampshire. Kathleen is really as innocent as a child, a sweet girl, and a great favourite of mine. Dear me, is that the dinner gong?"

CHAPTER VII

KATHLEEN

KATHLEEN CHESTER sat in the old tower, deep in thought. The sunlight, falling through the open door, lighted on a face which charmed by its vivacious prettiness. Beauty is a rare and compelling force, but the fragile grace of girlhood makes a wider and more wistful appeal. Kathleen was pretty and delightful as only an English girl of twenty-one can be; graceful with the tender lines and curves of youth; typically English, and Hampshire at that, with one of those clear oval faces which are the birthright of the girls of the county, dark-brown eyes (also of the county), and a sweet firm mouth.

She looked very English and modern in her grey walking costume and brown brogues. English she certainly was. She also believed herself to be a modern girl; but there she was mistaken. Her eyes had a deep and trustful glance full of the visions of youth. Still, if her eyes betrayed the idealist, there was latent strength of character, and plenty of it, in her steadfast look and the set of her little chin.

Kathleen was Sir Roger Lynngarth's ward, a charge left to him by his old friend, Major Richard Chester—Mad Dick Chester, Dick of the Hintons, as they called him in the county—who had married a Hampshire girl beneath him in station, broken her heart, quarrelled with his family, wrecked his constitution and career, and died impoverished, all in the space of five short years. His widow died soon after, worshipping him to the last in

spite of his faults, or perhaps because of them, and Kathleen, a dark-eyed mite of five, had been brought to Redways by Sir Roger, who had loved the dead man as a brother. He and his first wife had brought her up, loved her, and educated her like a daughter of their own, disdaining to touch the interest on the two thousand pounds which she had inherited through her maternal grandfather, a close-fisted Hampshire farmer, who had tied up his daughter's patrimony so that the scapegrace Dick Chester could not touch the principal. Views of money are comparative: to Farmer Enderly the two thousand represented wealth; the toilsome earnings of half a lifetime, laboriously amassed for his girl's comfort; to Sir Roger it was a mere fleabite, a beggarly pittance. His affection centred on Kathleen more and more as his own son disappointed him. Redways was entailed, but he could leave Kathleen enough to make her a considerable heiress, to say nothing of what Lady Mercer might do. Certainly the child was never likely to want for money.

Kathleen was not thinking of her prospects at that moment in the old tower, where she always went when she wanted to be alone.

The tower was the remnant of an abbey destroyed by Henry VIII. Seen from outside, it rose from the green earth like a withered tooth. Even the Normans could not build to defy Time, and all that was left of the original abbey was the lofty belfry with the remains of two walls. The tower had survived as the strongest member of the family survives, but the masses of ivy which covered the crumbling walls were after it, clutching its throat, and threatening to bring it down in the long run by sheer dead weight. But it was sturdy enough yet, and the oak platform in the turret where the bell hung was as sound as when it was built.

Kathleen was thinking of Robert's return—that unexpected return announced by a letter which had come by the morning's post, shattering the serenity of their quiet lives like a thunderbolt from a clear sky.

She had the strangest memories of the man who was supposed to be dead—memories in which love and fear came uppermost in turn. The earliest and deepest was affection for the fair-haired boy who had been like a big brother to her—had played with her and carried her in his arms. That was a dear and delightful recollection at times difficult to recall because it was so overlaid by later impressions. She recalled vividly how she had grieved over his departure twelve years before. That departure was connected in her mind with an air of depression which hung over the house for months afterwards. She remembered seeking news of him from Lady Lynngarth, and how that kind face had become suddenly distorted in a passion of weeping. She had caught her in her arms, crying, "My boy, will he ever come back?" And Kathleen, terrified by the loss of self-control in one she had never seen other than gracious and benignant, had clung to her saying passionately, "Never mind, auntie, you have me still—you have me still."

The fear was of more gradual growth, brought about by the realization that some strange mystery surrounded his disappearance from his father's house. His absence was not spoken of, except by the servants, who discussed it in whispers—with raised eyebrows. Nobody knew the reason—or if they knew they would not tell her. But she gathered in some way that father and son had quarrelled, and because of it Robert had gone away.

She had often wistfully recalled his memory, this delightful playmate of her early days—the tall, laughing boy with fair hair and blue eyes, who used to swing her

in his arms on the lawn, and take her swimming and fishing with him. He had been her hero and her god. For weeks after he went away she had cried herself to sleep at nights, and in the daytime had wandered about the house looking for him, like a small dog seeking an absent master. The grown-ups were vague when she questioned them, after the way of grown-ups with children. And after Lady Lynngarth's tears she asked no more questions. Her childish mind realized then that there were things she was not to know. In the course of time she had become reconciled, as one does when time passes. After Lady Lynngarth's death her memory of the wanderer, kept alive till then by the dead woman's sorrow, grew more dim. She began to grow up, to exchange the spontaneity of childhood for the self-consciousness of girlhood. She put up her hair, and with that act put away childish things forever. She believed that Robert had died—killed in the war was the accepted view. The war accounted for so many things.

So the playmate of her childhood days passed out of her life and memory. For years he had been the faintest memory, and thought of rarely.

And now?

He had come back as suddenly as he had gone away. The years that had passed! It was twelve years since he had left home, and they had never heard of him—until now. Twelve years! She was grown up, in her twenties, with a woman's outlook and intelligence and thoughts. How far-off those old days seemed! What had they in common now? He could not take her in his arms and swing her around the lawn. She smiled faintly at the idea.

He might take her in his arms and kiss her, though. She flushed a little at the thought.

A stoat, entering the tower on business of its own, stopped in consternation at the sight of the girl, fixing on her an eye which glinted ruddily, like a small red bead. The dog made a dash, but the stoat vanished through a chink in the old grey walls. The little terrier barked and made a futile effort to tear down the solid Norman masonry with his teeth. His excitement aroused Kathleen. She looked at the watch on her wrist, and was startled at the lateness of the hour and the long shadows cast by a declining sun.

"Come, Jack," she said.

The dog responded with a yelp, and led the way from the tower. From the edge of the wood a green slope ran down to the garden, but she took her way through the trees. The wood was dense and rather dark, and carpeted thick with bracken. Birds were not plentiful, but weasels and stoats thrived in the thick cover, with shrews and water-voles, and a badger or two, on the banks of the river at the farther side. At night, tawny owls hooted in the thick trees.

It was the longer way to the house, but Kathleen was fond of the wood, and liked to linger there in the deep quiet glades of oak and beech, now faintly bronzed. But this night she did not linger. It was already dusk, and she felt unaccountably nervous in the flickering elfin light. The dog had disappeared on some excursion into the undergrowth, after the manner of his kind, and night seemed closing in.

She emerged at last into a leafy lane which widened and led to the meadows beside the river. It was lighter here, with the last rays of the sun falling like silver upon the river, giving the old thorns a new grace, and touching the harebells by the water's brink. Kathleen slackened her pace, making her way across the fields in the

mellow eventide. She felt ashamed now of her nervousness in the wood.

The path led her by the river-side. She followed it quickly, still intent on her thoughts, until a bend of the stream brought Redways into view, lying in the hollow in front of her, not far away.

Across the flats, between the river and the wood, a cottage stood at the end of a narrow lane. It was a small place set back in an old-fashioned garden full of hollyhocks, phloxes, and rambler roses drooping pink in a lush of green, with a front hedge and a white gate between two bushes of crimsoning haws.

At the sight of the cottage Kathleen left the river path and turned towards it. She had to deliver a message from Sir Roger to the gamekeeper who lived there. She crossed the sward quickly, a slim and graceful figure, and entering the garden gate, knocked at the cottage door.

There was no immediate response, then, after a minute's pause, she heard a sound within. It was a peculiar sound, as of someone hopping about inside. It affected Kathleen's nerves unpleasantly, though she had heard it before and knew what it meant.

The door was opened by an unusual figure: tall and crippled, supporting himself by a crutch beneath his right arm. On one leg he hopped; the other swung uselessly, bent backwards as if in the act of kneeling, and encased from knee to ankle in plaster of Paris, which gave the limb a monstrous and unnatural shape. Apart from this deformity, the man was noticeable enough, of a supple and easy grace of outline which contrasted in the strangest fashion with his stiff and swollen leg. There was a hint of the Romany in the olive skin and eyebrows in straight black line; a suggestion of the hawk in the close

glittering eyes above a sharply arched nose. Altogether, an unexpected being to come across in the capacity of gamekeeper upon an English gentleman's estate. He was wearing a red cap on his head, but he removed it as he looked forth from his door-step and saw who his visitor was.

"Good evening, miss. Will you be pleased to come inside?"

He leapt backwards lightly and gracefully, and stood suspended on his crutch within, inviting a clear entry. The cottage had no passage, and the open door showed a small room with a score of bird-cages ranged along the walls. Some of the cages held birds, and others small animals. A parraquet glanced at Kathleen through wicker bars. Its next-door neighbours were a greenfinch and blue titmouse. Other birds, some English, some foreign, perched in shadow apparently headless, had retired for the night with their heads beneath their wings. And from somewhere in the cottage came a strange medicinal smell, sickly and unpleasant, which a naturalist would have classified as the odour of a colony of noctule bats.

The gamekeeper, dark and lissome, despite his leg, stood amid his birds and animals, looking down upon Kathleen. In that attitude he conveyed the impression of some larger bird with a broken wing. He was—or had been—of migrant kind. His stay at Redways dated from his appearance in the quiet valley of Itchen one evening in the course of last summer, when his crutch had carried him up the carriage drive of the great house, to the old garden where Lady Lynngarth was snipping roses. There his migratory course had ended; at any rate, for the time being. Kathleen understood that Stella had relieved him, and afterwards Sir Roger—investigating

his case or accepting his story as one wounded in the war, which came to the same thing—had made him a gamekeeper on the estate, with duties which took into merciful account the handicap of a maimed leg. But the new gamekeeper showed surprising agileness in spite of that drawback, and, gun on shoulder, leaped about the country-side in a manner disturbing to simple country minds, unaccustomed to such methods of progression. He was not a popular figure with the rustics. He lived a solitary life in his cottage, and the naturalistic hobby which led him to fill the place with birds and animals, to say nothing of reptiles, did nothing to lessen the prevailing disfavour with which he was regarded by the native-born of the county of Gilbert White.

Kathleen, a modern and educated young lady of presumably more enlightened mind, disliked the man also, for no reason beyond having taken a dislike to his face at first sight. The gamekeeper bore himself towards her with respect, and she really had nothing against him; but the feeling remained, and she wondered why Sir Roger employed him. That feeling was uppermost now, with the thought that the man had no right to ask her into his cottage.

“No, thank you. I have called with a message from Sir Roger. He wants you to thin the rabbits on the far side of the wood, and dig out the burrows on the slope by the old abbey tower. They are far too numerous. Farmer Stone has been complaining. They have been destroying his crops.”

“Very well, miss. I’ll see about it to-morrow.”

“And Sir Roger wants the plan of the new fishing-hut which he lent you.”

“Certainly, Miss Chester, I have it here.” He spoke these words in the tone of an equal, hopping nearer to

the door-way on his crutch. Balancing himself on that instrument, he plunged his hand into the pocket of his velveteen jacket, and drew forth a packet of papers which he looked through. While he was thus engaged, Kathleen's eye was caught by an envelope among the documents—a small envelope of hand-made paper bearing the red crest and monogram of the Lynngarths. The girl wondered how this envelope had come into the gamekeeper's possession, for she was aware that Sir Roger used another and plainer stationery for sending out instructions to the men employed on his estate. Its presence in the gamekeeper's pocket seemed all the more strange because it was blank and unaddressed. Then the man found the plan and handed it to her, and the crested envelope disappeared with the other papers back into his velveteen pocket.

Kathleen hurried home in the faint evening glow. The terrier scampered ahead, unworried by time, and raced her across the garden and up the wide terraced steps. Inside the shuttered and lighted house she met the parlourmaid, who looked at her with faint surprise. Kathleen spoke to the girl rather breathlessly:

"Tell me, Moira, has Mr. Lynngarth arrived yet?"

"Oh, yes, miss, some time ago. I opened the door to him."

Kathleen glanced round nervously. "I'm very late."

"Yes, miss. Dinner will be served in ten minutes, miss."

From the hall came the sound of voices. Kathleen could distinguish Lady Mercer's tones, and the note of a masculine voice which was new to her. Could it be Robert's? She thrilled at that assumption, listening intently. No; she could not identify that subdued murmur, but perhaps that was not so strange—after twelve years.

Her hesitating footsteps took her nearer, and she laid her hand upon the door——

No! She could not face him then and meet him thus after twelve years. She knew that she was flushed and dishevelled, hair blown about her face, her walking skirt muddy and covered with brambles. Stella was in there as well as Lady Mercer, for she could hear her voice: Stella, immaculate and beautiful, in her wonderful evening clothes. That would be too much of a contrast. Thinking thus, Kathleen caught a glimpse of her own flushed cheeks and tumbled hair in a mirror close by, and smiled rather ruefully. She decided to run up to her room by way of the servants' staircase, and put on her prettiest dress, before the great ordeal.

The startling sound of the gong for dinner sent her scurrying down the corridor with flying feet, like Cinderella at the stroke of twelve. And as she sped she told herself that she must dress in five minutes—ten at the outside.

CHAPTER VIII

ROBERT LYNNGARTH'S STORY

WITH her fingers on the handle of the dining-room door, Kathleen paused. From within came the decorous clatter of knives and forks, and a murmur of voices dominated by Lady Mercer's clear high tone. Fearing her courage if she hesitated longer, Kathleen opened the door and walked in.

An oblong panelled room, rich in colouring, hung with pictures, a company around a glittering table of damask drooping in stiffly perfect folds: this scene met her gaze. She caught the faint frosty gleam of Sir Roger's disapproving pince-nez directed towards her as her eyes rested upon the seated figures at table—travelled round them questioningly, nervously . . .

Robert had risen. Their eyes met. He came straight towards her with both hands held out, and wondered should he kiss her.

"My Lady Fibbets—grown up," was all he said, in a voice the others could not hear.

His look thrilled her. She felt absurdly small and inconsequential standing there, looking up at the tall bronzed man who did not in the least resemble the fair-haired boy of her childhood days. His eyes alone reminded her of his boyhood: she seemed to see the blue eyes of Robert smiling at her as though from a great distance—through the mists of time. They were his eyes, and yet—— In their depths was an expression which had not been in the eyes of her old companion: something she could not define, but she wished it had not been there.

It was a look which implied much without revealing it: the hidden events of twelve years—those years of which she knew nothing. It was the look of one who had been through the bitter mill of experience, and seen corroding things; but she did not know that. All she realized was that he had changed. His eyes seemed to probe her, but her own did not waver. Handsome? Oh, yes, he was handsome, in a kind of fierce, wild way, but he was not a bit like the well-bred and good-looking English boy whom she remembered so well. *He* had gone, never to return. She had never feared him, but this new Robert Lynngarth . . . Ah, the years, “the years that the locust had eaten”!

“You have changed,” she murmured, and despised herself for that banal remark, but she felt helpless, and could think of nothing else.

“And you have grown into a woman,” he said simply.

“Yes—I suppose so,” she mechanically assented.

“We cannot talk of old times just now, Kathleen. We must wait until we are alone—in the morning.”

He looked at her with smiling inquiry. She made a diffident gesture of assent. His instant recognition of the old understanding between them thrilled her by its spontaneity. In spirit he was unchanged: he had been thinking of her as she had thought of him. He picked up their past years where they had been broken off, with a complete and eager expectation of her ready response. That attitude elated her—filled her with shy inward joy. He had felt the ache, the miss, too! The thought seemed to lift the weight of the years and bring back the Robert Lynngarth of old. Touched and moved, she looked up at him with slightly flushed face, but did not speak.

Her reply, if meditated, remained unspoken. Mrs. Horbury rose from her place at table and swooped down

upon her like a motherly hen, clucking endearments, pecking kisses at her vivid cheek. How well she was looking! But there—there was nothing like country air to give girls a colour. And Robert too—the *picture* of health. What did Kathleen think of him—the naughty returned wanderer! She must make him tell them what he had been doing with himself all these years. And so on, until the enthusiastic lady had to pull up to take a long breath, and lapsed into silence, panting benevolently.

Thus the moment of their first meeting passed, and with it all the things Kathleen had meant to say. But there was always the morning. She took her place at the table. Lady Mercer's eyes dwelt upon her.

"Where have you been, Kathleen?" she asked.

"I was walking, and went into the abbey tower to rest. I'm sorry I'm late."

From his place Robert looked across at her as if about to speak, then changed his mind and kept silence.

At the head of the table Stella looked still and remote as an Alpine flower, the soft waxlights falling on the wonderful shade of her golden hair and downcast face. Kathleen looked like a flower too—a flower of different, more English type, vivid and sweet-bloomed. Mrs. Horbury's face was in colour like a red rose above the same white cloth, but there her own resemblance to a flower ended. Robert looked grave and preoccupied. Kathleen, eyes busier than knife and fork, wondered what he was thinking of. It was not the happy look of a man returning to his home after twelve years' absence. But, then, he might be thinking of his mother. How strange it was for him to come back after all these years and find his mother gone and another woman in her place! Once she thought she caught his eye across the table, and smiled at him, but he did not smile back. She was a

little hurt at that, but concluded that his thoughts were elsewhere, and that he had not noticed her. She would have been astonished had she known that Robert's thoughts were indeed far away from that glittering table and the company around it, back on his island, alone among his birds, and that the ceaseless burden of his unspoken thought was: "Fool, fool, for coming back."

Towards the end of the meal there was some conversation, led by Sir Roger, who discoursed on political subjects, such as the good intentions of America, Anglo-French relations, and the Irish problem. Glenluce and Stonnard talked with him, and little Mr. Horbury fixed his eyes on his host with the air of one favoured with the revelation of some divine oracle, bowing his head from time to time to show how deeply he was treasuring the words of wisdom.

Afterwards, in the drawing-room, the atmosphere thawed. The drawing-room was the most modern interior of the house, and had been redecorated in pink and gold in honour of Sir Roger's young bride. She now flitted about the room like a bird in its bower, hovered from gramophone to piano, and back again. But there was no suggestion of music. The return of Robert was not, in view of everything, an occasion for gay sounds, and there was always Lady Mercer to be considered when the question of music was in the air. Lady Mercer had decided tastes in that direction. Fortunately she had not yet seen the new gramophone bought by Sir Roger for his young wife to lighten the tedium of winter evenings in the country, and hidden behind a large screen in a corner of the room. Lady Mercer did not dislike gramophones, but she would have regarded such an instrument in a house like Redways as unworthy of the traditions of the place.

Outside, the night descended heavy and dark. Within, the occupants of the drawing-room showed a disposition to animation, the result of good food, wine, bright lights, and a pretty room. The awkwardness of the first meeting had passed away. Robert, now animated, stood chatting to Glenluce and Stonnard, who were questioning him about the Far East. His hearers heard him with an interest which in Glenluce's case was specially marked. Sir Roger listened a little part, his eyes resting on his son with a milder look. In appearance Robert was a son of whom any father might feel proud. Glenluce, at least, was strongly attracted to him. It was, on the whole, the most human and sociable moment of Robert's return.

The ladies formed a group apart, three of them talking, and Stella quiet, after her wont. Mrs. Horbury harped on Robert's return. She was lost in wonder at it as at a miracle. Her eyes kept glancing towards him.

"He has grown very like his father," she said.

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Kathleen involuntarily.

"He will be—in another thirty years," said Lady Mercer dryly.

Kathleen tried to picture Robert looking like his father in thirty years' time, but failed. She looked from Sir Roger to his son, and back again. It was the difference between ice and fire. Yet a fire could die out and become a heap of ashes. Robert had changed—oh, greatly changed—in twelve years. But would he ever become frigid—an iceberg—like his father? No, that was impossible.

"I don't see why the men should keep Robert to themselves after all these years," remarked Lady Mercer. She raised her voice: "Robert, come here. We want to talk to you."

He came at once, with a smile.

"Sit down in that chair, my dear boy," she said, "and tell us something about yourself."

"I'm afraid I've nothing worth telling," he said.

"You ought to be like a popular edition of *The Arabian Nights*," she rejoined, "full of amazing tales. Come, recount your adventures to us—suitably expurgated, of course, for feminine ears."

He laughed outright at that, and it was good to hear him, Kathleen thought. He had a laugh like a boy's, clear and ringing.

"What am I to tell you?" he asked.

"Tell us the truth." She flashed on him one of her shrewd glances. "Didn't I hear you say just now that you'd been living on an island somewhere or other? Tell us about that."

"I'm afraid that would only bore you," he rejoined deprecatingly. "It was an uncivilized sort of place."

"All the better," retorted the old lady. "I'm bored to death with civilization—taxation, politicians, motor-cars, picture papers, and all the rest of it. I'd live on your island myself if I thought these things wouldn't follow me there."

"My island is less interesting than civilization," said Robert, with a smile. "Nothing but seabirds—gulls and albatrosses—and that kind of thing."

"A sweet bird—the albatross, I mean," murmured Mrs. Horbury vaguely, with some confused idea that an albatross was a talking bird she had seen in a Putney bird-shop, white, with a yellow crest. "A poetic bird!"

"Come now, Robert," said Lady Mercer. "You hear that? Tell us about your poetic birds! I've more poetry in my composition than you'd imagine."

"Emmeline recites poetry admirably," remarked little Mr. Horbury, to nobody in particular.

"Indeed!" said Lady Mercer. "Then some day we must hear her. But just now Robert is going to talk to us. Stella, don't you want to hear about this island of Robert's?"

"Yes," was the response, given with a slight fluttering smile, and a glance of her golden-brown eyes in Robert's direction. She laid aside her magazine and drew nearer.

Robert Lynngarth looked down on her for a moment, then turned to Lady Mercer.

"Very well," he said, "I'll talk about the island until I've bored you."

He drew up a chair and began to talk, diffidently at first, with an eye for the first symptoms of boredom in his listeners, but easily and discursively, of odd nooks and corners of the world where he had been. He did not say what had taken him so far afield and off the beaten track. His was a narrative of external impressions, of strange scenes, deftly told and brightly coloured, but revealing nothing of himself beyond the fact that he had been many things in turn, but nothing for long. Apparently adventure was for ever calling him—beckoning him on with elusive finger: an unending quest which led him ultimately to that remote island in the South Pacific.

This part of his story was lightly conveyed, but to one of his hearers it brought up a vision of loneliness and solitude she was ever to remember: a scene sombre and mysterious as the setting of a dream. Kathleen seemed to see the crying birds, the glittering cliffs, a sun setting in deep waters, leaving Robert Lynngarth in darkness there, like the last man in the world. She shivered a little at that thought, and wondered why he had gone there, away from everybody. She noticed that he said nothing of that, nor how the letter reached him which had brought him back to England. But that she was to learn later.

Suddenly it came to her, she knew not why, that Robert's story had some special significance, greater than his words conveyed. There was some under-current, something deeper still. He was talking now with an intensity and eagerness which had been lacking at first. Kathleen gathered the curious impression that he had forgotten his group of auditors, and was addressing himself to some invisible intelligence for a hidden purpose of his own. That seemed an absurd idea, yet she could not altogether banish it from her mind. She glanced round the circle of hearers. Glenluce and Stonnard were deeply interested in his story, and so was Lady Mercer. Sir Roger's face revealed nothing. Little Mr. Horbury sat as though listening to a sermon. His wife, next to him, was half asleep. Stella sat a little apart, with downcast eyes. Glancing towards Robert, Kathleen observed that he was looking directly at the pensive and beautiful face of his father's young wife.

There was nothing strange about that of course—Stella was so beautiful that Kathleen could well understand the returned son looking at the woman who occupied the place of the mother he had journeyed so far to see; but at that moment Stella looked slowly up, smiled into Robert's face, and dropped her eyes again.

It was a strange smile with the eyes only, and instantly veiled—inscrutable yet provocative, with a hint of something more in its dazzling golden depths. It was a smile which shocked some unsealed virginal primness in Kathleen's breast, though she was far from understanding its true nature and meaning. She only felt that Stella had no right to smile at Robert like that considering the relationship between them. Then, being a healthy-minded girl, she took herself to task for thinking such a thing. A smile—what harm could there be in a smile?

Still, the smile was strange when contrasted with a scene at the breakfast table that morning. Kathleen musingly recalled it now. Jauncey, putting Stella's letters beside her, had placed the fateful letter from Robert on the top of the heap. That was a sufficiently disturbing document to be inadvertently opened by a second wife—a letter from an absent son to a dead mother. It accounted also for the scene that followed—Stella's pallor and tears, her hasty departure from the breakfast-room with a sympathetic husband in her wake. Kathleen alone had seen that Stella started suddenly when she picked up the envelope before she was aware of the contents within. What was there in that unknown handwriting to cause her fear or even surprise? Kathleen could not guess. And if Stella was sent into a tremor by the contents of the letter itself, and had seemed to dread the coming of the long-absent son, how was it that she now smiled at Robert in a way Kathleen had never seen her smile before?

These were things Kathleen did not comprehend, but indeed she had long since given up trying to understand Sir Roger's second wife. She was beautiful—the most beautiful thing Kathleen had ever seen—but there was something mysterious about her also. Kathleen had tried hard to be friends with Stella at first, but Stella had kept her at arm's length. Apparently she was one of those women who go alone, who dislike or fear their own sex, and do not seek their friendship. Kathleen reflected that, although she had lived under the same roof with Stella for nearly three years, they were still almost as complete strangers to each other as at the beginning, when Sir Roger first brought his young wife to Redways. They met at meals, talked, sometimes played tennis together, and gave Sir Roger music in the drawing-room

after dinner, but there was no real communion or affinity between them. Kathleen was an outdoor girl, fond of walking, while Stella was indolent, loved shade rather than sunshine, kept much to the old garden and the house, where she passed a passive luxurious life which to Kathleen seemed rather unworthy of the mistress of Redways. But that was Sir Roger's affair—not hers, and Sir Roger adored his young wife and could see no fault in her. The servants liked her too, and so did Lady Mercer. Kathleen neither liked nor disliked her. To the girl she was a dim and unapproachable figure, living alone with her beauty like a goddess in a temple, but rather overweighted with her present part.

Now, for the first time, she felt that she disliked her, because of that smile. It was a revelation of her hidden temperament, but a revelation which Kathleen was unable to read aright. Again, she conscientiously checked this line of thought, accusing herself of a lack of charity.

Robert finished as abruptly as he had commenced. "I'm afraid I've been boring you," he said apologetically.

"I am sure it has been most interesting," said Mrs. Horbury politely.

"I wish you'd take me to see your island," said Stella.

The words were spoken idly enough, but there was a sparkle in her eyes, as though the story had given a savour to a listless hour. Lady Mercer smiled indulgently.

"You'd better take us all there, Robert. The place ought to be worth seeing, if only for the absence of politicians and motor-cars."

"I'd have to carry you ashore," he replied in the same spirit.

"Oh, do let's all go!" exclaimed Stella eagerly, like a child.

"You have had a lonely life," observed Glenluce to Robert. "Do you find England much changed?"

"Changed—certainly, but still England. London seems to have grown bigger too."

"I can hardly imagine living in a place beyond a railway journey from London," said Glenluce.

"London is a kind of magnet for Englishmen," said Robert Lynngarth with a smile.

"An Englishman must get out of touch with civilization—out there." The speaker was Stonnard, and his vague gesture seemed to encircle the whole globe outside of England.

"You get into a different way of looking at things, certainly," was the reply.

"In what respect?" asked Stonnard.

"You return with the feeling that England is the true outpost of Empire—a country of undiscovered islanders."

Lady Mercer smiled, but Stonnard looked puzzled.

"London is the centre of the world," he said. "If one wants to do anything, there is no place like London to do it in."

"It depends upon what one wants to do," rejoined Robert Lynngarth tersely.

"We all want to do the same thing, I fancy."

"For instance?"

"Well, all men want success."

"What do you mean by success? Power, money, or influence?"

"Money is everything," rejoined Stonnard. "The other things go with money."

Robert looked at Glenluce.

"What do you say, Colonel Glenluce?"

"I am inclined to agree with Stonnard. Money is everything nowadays—since the war."

"Money is a great power for good, used aright," remarked Sir Roger, speaking for the first time.

"I've heard that before, Roger," murmured Lady Mercer.

"I cannot agree with you," said Robert Lynngarth, glancing around him. "There is a greater thing than money. Freedom, liberty, are better worth having."

His father lifted his head and turned his pince-nez on him, but did not speak.

"No man is free," said Glenluce thoughtfully.

Robert turned to him. "In civilization, no; but I was not thinking of civilization."

"Of what, then?" said Glenluce. "If you are going to do away with all things——"

"If you want freedom you must first have money," Stonnard broke in. "The world is run on money."

"Your world—yes. But there are more worlds than yours. Money is nothing—really."

Robert spoke in such an earnest voice that Glenluce considered him with interest. He was changed: vigorous and natural, like a man who had snapped some invisible restraint, and stepped forth free. His eyes were sparkling and his cheeks flushed. Across the circle their eyes met. Glenluce spoke.

"Men will do much to get money, and more still to keep it," he said with a smile.

Robert looked him full in the face for the first time.

"I once came across a gold-mine," he said, "an auriferous dry river-bed in New Guinea—German New Guinea then, before the war. It was in the interior, and a native showed me the place. There was plenty of gold there—the outcrop was rich enough, at all events."

"An interesting find," said Glenluce. "What did you do with it?"

"The gold? Nothing. I was only too glad to get away with my life. New Guinea is a fearsome place of cannibals, swamps, alligators, and dengue fever. It has a kind of sinister charm, though, for all that."

Stonnard, listening, lifted an eyebrow. "That's too self-sacrificing for me. Catch me relinquishing a mine if I ever had the luck to find one!"

"If the mine had been diamonds I might have stayed," said Robert.

"Why diamonds more than gold?" asked Glenluce curiously.

"Because their beauty lasts for ever. A diamond has purity and passion—rarest of combinations! A cold surface, but a heart of fire. Hardness is needed to preserve beauty—in a world like this. A perfect emerald is perhaps more beautiful, but——"

Again Glenluce glanced at the speaker, with interest.

"But what?" he asked, as he came to a pause.

"The beauty is evanescent. It tarnishes, and is easily destroyed by rough usage."

Stella glanced down at her right hand, on which gleamed an emerald—her husband's gift to her on their wedding day. Her eyes also sought his face, but he was looking straight before him.

"I wish you would tell us something more about that mine you discovered," Stonnard said, after a pause. "Could you find it again?"

"I could. I have a map—a plan shall I say?—of the track back to the coast. Markings and bearings—that sort of thing. And I brought back a nugget with me—broken off the outcrop. I'll show it to you to-morrow, if you're interested."

"I should like to see it."

"There's a fortune there, lying fallow." He laughed shortly.

"It may have been discovered since?" suggested Glenluce.

"No; for you'd have heard of it. The world would have rung with the news. It's a rich field, and all the gluttonous little adventurers of the world would have flocked there, like flies at treacle."

Stonnard wondered. "You've never given it another thought?"

"No," said Robert tersely. "I want no gold."

"Ah, if you had!" said Stella softly. "Gold—money—is good when you need it."

She flashed a swift look at him—a look which Kathleen alone saw. Again it seemed to her to have some special significance, and again she told herself that she was mistaken.

CHAPTER IX

AFTER LONG YEARS

THEY were three at breakfast—Sir Roger, Kathleen, and Stonnard. Glenluce had gone back to London by an early train, the Horburys were inveterate late risers, and Stella and Lady Mercer preferred to breakfast in their rooms. Lady Mercer had told Robert the night before that he must not expect to see her at the morning meal. “No woman of my age should show herself before dusk,” she remarked. “Women think nowadays that art can make them look young at sixty, but that’s nonsense. I prefer to entertain old age in my room alone. But I shall see you later, Robert.”

Robert’s absence remained unexplained, and passed without comment by his father. Sir Roger had other things to occupy his mind—important letters from London, predicting the rising of a political storm. He discussed the situation with Stonnard. It was only Kathleen, eyes wistfully alert, who watched the door for the missing son who had returned from abroad on the previous night.

He entered as his father and Stonnard departed by the opposite door to answer letters so important to the kingdom at large. Perhaps he had waited for that moment; Kathleen, at least, was not inclined to quarrel with a move which suggested that he wished to talk to her alone. She smiled at him as he came in, and he came to where she was sitting and stood looking down at her.

"Lady Fibbets," he said, "this carries me back. This seems to bridge the years."

She felt nearer to him then than at any moment since his return, but she did not speak.

Jauncey appeared as if by magic to superintend breakfast for the late arrival. He hovered around, a noiseless minister, uncovering dishes and adjusting spirit-flames. His eye, catching the late-comer's, interrogated his desires.

"Anything you would like, sir?" he murmured.

"There's plenty here," said Robert, glancing at the sideboard.

As Jauncey vanished through the doorway he poured out a cup of coffee and helped himself to a piece of dry toast. These viands consumed, he turned to Kathleen.

"I want no more breakfast. Let us go into the garden. We can talk there."

She ran for a garden hat, and was back in an instant, her fresh young face glancing up at him from shady head-gear. He smiled at her.

"You have not changed much, Lady Fibbets."

His voice seemed to envelop her like a wave. She was conscious, however, of the contrast between his tone and his troubled eyes. He turned and unfastened a window of the breakfast-room which opened upon terrace and lawn.

They stepped outside into the garden, already a festival of light and perfume. Sunshine flooded grass and parterre, glittered upon the bronze girl, and flashed through the spray of water in the dolphin's mouth, giving it an iridescent tint. Robert Lynngarth stood for a moment looking down into the pond beneath, where dragon-flies darted among floating water-lilies, and carp hovered lazily in the clear still depths. Then he turned to the

old sundial near, and scanned the old Latin inscription.

"Time flies," he murmured. "True, unfortunately true, for all of us. That wouldn't matter so much if it didn't shake us off as it flew. 'The bird is on the wing'—do you remember that, Kathleen? A sinister kind of bird, this Time! Still, I might have marked its flight better with this old sundial to remind me. It would have been useful on my island."

"I should like to see your island," she said simply.

"Perhaps you may, some day, Lady Fibbets," he rejoined.

She was silent, looking across the garden. He went on:

"Did you ever write to me there, Lady Fibbets?"

Her eyes looked her amazement. "I—I do not understand," she faltered. "What do you mean?"

"Not now!" He met her wonderment with a whimsical smile. "Do not ask me to explain—at present. At this moment I need all my faculties to realize that I'm back at Redways and in the old garden with you. The bird of Time has fluttered off with twelve years of our lives, but just now I'm holding him by the wings. This is our morning, Lady Fibbets."

She glanced quickly at him, and her eyes were bright.

"Yes," she said, in a low tone.

"Then let us take a walk to some of the old spots. You shall act as guide, and I'll see how well I remember them."

She assented with a smile, and they left the garden, walking easily. Kathleen was rather thoughtful just then. There was a note in his demeanour which struck her as rather forced—though not on her account, she hoped. He ought to be happy at that moment for his own sake. But was he? He struck her as one with something on his mind, and over-acting his part a little

in consequence. She lifted timid eyes to his bronzed face, but could gather nothing there.

She turned into a path which led across the fields to the churchyard. He kept silence, walking beside her until they neared the gate. Then he stopped, looking full at her.

"Where are you taking me?" he asked.

"The churchyard," she said gently. "I thought you would like to come here first."

"No," he said gravely, stopping her with a look she did not understand. "Not now. I was there, earlier, before you were up. Let us go to the old tower on the hill." His hand pointed to its grey shape against the sky. "I was up there this morning too."

She agreed, as she would have to any suggestion of his, and they turned their faces in the direction of the green slope which the grey crag topped. When they reached it she looked at him with a smile.

"Do you remember where we kept the key?"

His face went blank at that, and her own fell a little as she noted it. She removed a loose stone from the wall and showed a key hidden within.

"It was a secret between us in the old days," she reminded him, "but not now."

He nodded with a smile, and entered the tower. In the glancing rays of the sun they stood, looking round them. The place had its memories for them both. It was shadowy in the recesses, but outside the sunshine danced and flickered in the wood. Robert's eyes sought the short flight of stairs leading to the bell-tower. Yielding to an impulse, he went across and mounted them, and Kathleen followed suit.

Together they looked round them again. They were in a small square room of solid stone, lit by a narrow slit

in the masonry high up. A rope dangled from the darkness above their heads and fell in a festoon at their feet. Looking up into the shadow of the tower, they could just discern an oaken platform and the shape of the hidden bell.

"I wonder when the bell was last rung?" said Robert.

"When the abbey was destroyed by Henry VIII," she rejoined. "Have you forgotten the old legend?"

He laughed. "If the bell hasn't been rung since Tudor days, the rope would have rotted away before this. It looks too strong to be hundreds of years old. Perhaps there has been a new rope since. I wonder if the bell rings?"

He stretched a hand out, but she stepped quickly between him and the rope, exclaiming:

"What are you going to do?"

"I thought of trying the bell—of ringing a peal in honour of my return."

"Oh, no, no!" She spoke in agitation. "Don't do that. Surely you've not forgotten the story? It's the Abbot's bell."

He lifted questioning brows.

"The ghost of the Abbot believed to haunt Redways," she explained. "He rang the bell as he was struck down, and prophesied that if the bell ever rang again it would foretell the fall of the house—of the Lynngarths, who had wrecked his church and stolen his lands at the bidding of the brutal Henry. Oh, do not ring it, please."

"The best way to prevent the fulfilment of the curse would be to remove the rope," he said. "It's a wonder some one has not rung the bell before now, out of curiosity."

"Nobody visits the tower except me, and I never come up here. Let us go down. I do not like this place."

Robert took this with a smile. "I did not know you were superstitious, Lady Fibbets. Let us go down, if you wish."

They went down again to the lower part of the tower. Here Kathleen took her favourite seat, elbows on knees, chin on hands, looking out on the gleaming tracery of silver in the wood.

"I come here when I want to be alone," she told him, adding rather shyly: "I was here yesterday, before you arrived."

"I know," he rejoined.

"You knew!" she exclaimed. "How did you know?"

"I saw you."

With her eyes upon him he explained. She listened, rather disappointed that he had not thought proper to come to her then—before the others. Unaware of her feeling, he went on:

"Have I changed much, Lady Fibbets?"

She considered the question gravely, then said frankly:

"Yes; greatly changed."

"Would you have known me—otherwise?"

An almost imperceptible shake of the head was her answer.

"Do you wish to know what brought me back?"

Again a slight movement of the head, this time in affirmation.

With her eyes still fixed on the sunlight filtering through the bracken, she listened as he told her of the dead sailor who had drifted out of the storm to the island with a mail-bag in his hand. He spoke of it as chance—the one incredible chance which had brought him back to England and Redways.

"There was a letter in the bag for me," he said.

"From your mother?" she asked, in quick interrogation.

He hesitated. "Yes," he assented. Some obscure reason, deep down, prompted him to say nothing of her own childish letter which had been enclosed with the other, perhaps because she had so completely forgotten it.

She sat quite still, making no movement. The sunlight had shifted, and her face was indistinct. It was partly turned away, and he could see only a vague profile, shaded by heavy dark hair, and a small white ear. He wondered if she doubted him—if she disbelieved his story. It sounded far-fetched, impossible even, told now. Yet it had happened. An impulse came to him to convince her that he had spoken the truth. He raised his voice a little:

"It was that letter, so strangely delivered, which brought me back to England. If it had not reached me—been sent to me, perhaps—I would never have returned."

"Did you bring the letter back with you?" asked a tremulous voice from the shade.

He took it from his pocket-book and opened it carefully; a yellow sheet stained and rotted by sea-water.

"This is it," he said.

She held out her hand, and could just decipher the faded handwriting.

"Can you read it?" he asked.

She nodded, head bent over it. After a few minutes' silence she handed it back, and there were tears in her eyes.

He restored it to his pocket-book before he spoke.

"I could not disobey that sign."

The sadness of his voice thrilled her, and brought the whole strange thing before her like a vision. It floated

before her eyes as in a mirror; his solitary figure in flying spume by a forsaken shore, watching a corpse tossing in the waves.

There was a pause before he spoke:

"I suppose it was foolish to come back to England after all these years."

He stood up and walked about the narrow space, eyes fixed on the ground. From the shade she watched him with serious eyes. His lips moved:

"Sentiment—the folly of a fool."

Her ears, extraordinarily quick, caught the faint whisper of words she was not meant to hear. They brought to her a perception of the truth, as she supposed, that he had come to life again solely for his dead mother's sake. Hers was the sensation, with that realization, of a sleeper awakened from a glad dream. She spoke rather falteringly:

"You are sorry you came back, then?"

Her tone, rather than her words, caught his ear. He looked towards her, trying to see her clearly.

"It was worth all to come back and see you once again, Lady Fibbets."

He uttered the childish name with an indescribable cadence which set her heart beating, looking at her with the old boyish glance she remembered so well—the first time she had seen it on his face since his return. She moved a little nearer to him, and he caught the hand which hung at her side and pressed it to his lips.

"If that were all," he breathed.

But again she caught the words.

"All?" Her hand rested passively in his grasp, but her guileless eyes met his inquiringly. "All—what?"

"The years," he replied. "The years I have thrown away doing all sorts of useless things in far countries.

I have wasted the years, Lady Fibbets, and we have none too many to squander. One does not realize that until too late."

"That was not what you meant," she said, her candid glance still upon him.

"My dear girl!" he murmured, but did not explain, as she hoped. "There are things I want to know"—he spoke now in a different voice—"things which you alone can tell me. My mother, I want to hear about her. Did she suffer much? Did she speak of me? You know—you remember all."

She looked at him with gentle eyes. "Yes; I remember. I used to sit with her sometimes, and she often talked of you. She believed that you were still alive, and would return some day."

He was touched by her simple words, and was silent. When he spoke again he was deeply moved:

"How long ago did it happen?"

"Five years ago—at Christmas. They buried her two days before Christmas Day. The snow was on the ground. There were only a few there—that was her wish. We sang a favourite old hymn of hers, 'Nearer, my God, to Thee.' "

Robert Lynngarth, staring gloomily before him, seemed to be picturing this last scene: the grey churchyard set in leafless trees, the black and gaping vault, the knot of mourners in the snow singing in quavering unison for one who had been swept away into the river of nothingness. His mother had often sung that hymn to him in her sweet clear voice.

He broke a profound silence with an unexpected question:

"How did my father come to marry again?"

"I know very little about that," she replied in sur-

prise. "Sir Roger went up to London on a visit, and then wrote to tell us he was going to marry. The wedding was shortly afterwards, and after the honeymoon he brought Stella to Redways."

"Has she no friends or relations?"

"I believe she is the daughter of a clergyman who is dead," she hesitatingly replied. "They were married from the home of a Mrs. Dester, with whom Stella lived. She is a distant relative, I understand. I do not think Stella has any other relations. She is very beautiful, don't you think?" she added earnestly, as though that quality amply atoned for a lack of kin.

"Her beauty has carried her far."

She believed she understood his resentment, which indeed she shared. In the pause which followed it struck her, however, that there was something more than mere resentment in his attitude: something unreadable and mysterious. It was as though Robert Lynngarth, the Robert Lynngarth she knew, who had kissed her hand and called her his Lady Fibbets, had disappeared, and been replaced by some unknown wanderer of strange lands—a being who inspired both fear and mistrust within her. In that aspect he filled her with misgivings; his eyes, sombre and motionless now with hidden thought, caused her to think of the cold unseeing stare of some great seabird on his far-off island. She shivered a little, like one suddenly cold. The day seemed to darken, and there was a scent of decaying fungi in the air.

Robert roused himself suddenly and looked at his watch.

"Twelve o'clock!" he announced. "The bird of Time still flutters, Lady Fibbets. Have you anywhere else to take me—anything to show me?"

"Crikey is buried near here," she murmured.

From the tower she led the way to a spot close at

hand—an open space in the wood near a coppice. Here her eyes sought something and found it: a mound and small wooden cross in the long grass.

“He missed you so much when you went,” she said: “When he died two years after I thought you’d like him buried here, where he used to chase the rabbits. So I dug a grave, and put him in a little box. Then I cut the cross and wrote an inscription with an indelible pencil. I don’t know if you can read it still.”

The sun shone in the clear space. He bent down and made out the words:

In Memory of Crikey, who never forgot.

“It was a stormy day with a high wind,” she went on. “I remember how sad I was when I’d covered the earth over his little box. I felt quite alone in the world.”

In the silence of the woodland and the glancing light they stood side by side until Kathleen, lifting her head, uttered a slight exclamation. He questioned her with a look, and she pointed to the coppice in front of them. He could see nothing at first, then his eye caught something white in the green, near the ground. His glance, traveling upward from that point, saw the face of a man staring from the leafy screen at his own. Their looks met. The next moment the branches parted, and the man emerged. He was a strange figure, tall and slight, with a bent leg encased from knee to heel in plaster of Paris, as if a broken shin were set within. He hopped forward on a crutch held beneath the right arm, and stood regarding them.

“What are you doing here?” said Robert Lynngarth. “Don’t you know that this is a private park?”

"It's my business to be here," responded the other, gazing at his questioner with an intent dark eye.

"He is one of the gamekeepers," Kathleen whispered.

"A strange one!" muttered her companion, his steady glance resting on the uncanny figure with its enlarged and stiffened limb.

"Perhaps a better gamekeeper than many on two legs," responded the cripple fiercely.

"You do not belong to Hampshire, I fancy," said Robert Lynngarth, still looking him over.

The gamekeeper shook his head.

"Nor England either?"

"Can't anyone but an Englishman be a gamekeeper?"

"It depends on the man. What is your name?"

"Wells."

"Wells?"

"John Wells. That's English enough, isn't it? I've had it all my life, and I'm not going to change it. I was born into the world with the name of Wells, and I'll take it into the grave with me. John Wells. It's good enough for me, though I dare say some people would like something more high-sounding, such as Fortescue, or Beresford, or Raymond."

"Raymond?"

"James Raymond."

"James Raymond." The former bearer of that name repeated it impassively, as if trying the sound—uttered it with expressionless face.

The gamekeeper, face resting on crutch arm, looked at him fixedly, with a dark and sombre stare.

"Do you live on the estate?" said Robert finally.

"In the gamekeeper's cottage by the river."

"Very well," was the indifferent response. "If I want you at any time I shall know where to find you."

With a cold smile the gamekeeper turned away, springing through the wood on his crutch until the trees hid him from view. Robert watched him as he disappeared.

"A strange chap, that," he said.

"He reminds me of a great cat," said Kathleen. "Though I shouldn't say that. He was wounded in the war, which ought to make me feel kinder towards him. But I can never get used to seeing him springing about the woods like some strange animal."

Robert seemed sunk in thought. "How long has he been at Redways?"

"He came here last summer, begging. Sir Roger took pity on him—made him a gamekeeper, and gave him the little cottage by the alder pool to live in. Sir Roger thinks he is quite useful, considering his infirmity."

"He is hardly the kind of gamekeeper I should choose," was Robert Lynngarth's only comment. "It is lunch-time, Lady Fibbets. We had better go back to the house."

CHAPTER X

LADY MERCER REMEMBERS

HER heart went out to him that day in the abbey tower, if, indeed, it had not been his all her life; but she did not know that till afterwards. She only knew that in the days that followed his return she was perplexed and unhappy. The memory of one morning was hers, and no more. How was she to know that Robert Lynngarth, returning to life and his father's home, had stepped into a coil of things which entangled James Raymond, living on a solitary island in that desolate belt of water which sweeps unchecked around the southern rim of the world? Who would have thought that Chance could reach so far? But the fates are threefold, while Love is one, and blind.

Love, it seemed, was not for him, caught in the web of Chance—at least not that love which brings a man peace. He had left England under a cloud twelve years before; he had returned with it still enfolding him. Like a man risen from the dead, he walked apart, a figure of mystery and mistrust. He was not at ease in his new life; so much was apparent. He had been forgotten as his father's son, believed to be dead. His belated reappearance on life's stage was as startling as the uprising of an apparition—a thing to be whispered about and watched for. The rustics on his father's estate turned aside when they met him, distrusting and fearing him as they did the gamekeeper with the maimed leg, who hopped through the woods like some ungainly bird. It was that man's presence there, and the few words he had uttered

that day at the tower, which helped to keep Robert Lynngarth aloof and uneasy, because he did not understand what the incident meant. But Kathleen did not know this, either.

The week-end passed. The Horburys returned to Putney. Lady Mercer stayed on. Life ran smoothly in its ordered current at Redways, as if no long-absent son had come to life. Sir Roger spent his mornings with his secretary, his afternoons in supervising the work of the estate, as a conscientious English landlord should. A man nearing seventy has a due conception of the value of time: Sir Roger spent his hours like gold pieces, changing them into sixty minutes which were husbanded to the last second. He did not need the quickened fall of leaves from the tall elms to remind him of the waning of the year.

The ladies of the household passed their days after the manner of English ladies in the country. They talked, walked, and sometimes entertained visitors to tea, with a little tennis afterwards. Occasionally there would be a small dinner-party of half a dozen neighbours, where the guests discussed crops and the weather as if there was nothing else in life. Sir Roger talked politics to them, and Stella gave them a little music after dinner. For the rest, Stella kept to her garden, and Kathleen went for walks and rides alone.

It was a life into which Robert Lynngarth did not fit, partly, it may be, through there being no place for him. Father and son met at meals, and exchanged a few commonplaces—no more. Robert spent much of his spare time wandering about the woods and game-covers. Sometimes he fished in the alder pool. He was as prodigal of his days as his father was prudent—flinging away the golden hours like one who did not know how they

should be spent. There was something disturbing to Kathleen's mind in this spectacle of a man so completely heedless of the value of time. She vaguely imagined there was something wrong about it—something wasteful in Robert Lynngarth spending his days doing nothing, though, apparently, there was nothing for him to do. She saw his tall figure lounging about at all hours. More than once she saw him coming from the maimed game-keeper's cottage by the river-side, and wondered what took him there. It could not have been to gain any information about shooting or fishing, because the game-keeper was not there to give it. He was away in London with Sir Roger's consent, making one of his periodical visits for the treatment of his maimed leg.

There were days when Kathleen went out walking with Robert, but they were not times of such enjoyment as the first morning of his return. The woods were beautiful in the quiet autumn stillness, the robins and thrushes sang sweetly, but Robert was changed. Not outwardly. He called her by the old pet name, his eye dwelt on her with the same regard, but she felt somehow that these things did not count for so much now; it was not the same. She had the idea that the first impulse of their meeting after twelve years' absence had betrayed him into a warmth of feeling which he now regretted, and that his present friendliness was a pretence devised to spare her pain. He had erected a barrier around himself, within which his soul dwelt in isolation and watchful secrecy.

She guessed partly aright—in one respect at least. Robert, that being of impulse, had been replaced by James Raymond, the man who had learnt caution in the bitter school of experience.

They did not visit the abbey tower again, nor did Kath-

leen go there alone. It remained unheeded, a ruined and deserted landmark on the crest of the green rise, as much a part of the landscape as a tree.

That he had some secret she felt sure, but she had no notion of what it was—not then.

Sometimes Kathleen had the feeling that Robert and his father's wife were attracted to each other in some intangible way. Kathleen was observant, and once or twice she had seen them talking together when they thought themselves unnoticed. She watched them sharply after that, but their demeanour in the presence of others was so correct and restrained that she concluded she was mistaken, and was, indeed, a little ashamed for thinking such a thing possible. A more experienced perception might not have been so easily lulled, but Kathleen's mind was innocent of worldly guile. She did not guess then that they had known each other before, in a far-off land. That was something they discreetly veiled, an episode they had good reason to keep to themselves.

The days wore on, the leaves fell faster, and the year was passing into a calm decline, when Kathleen found herself in the position of onlooker at that mysterious series of events which led up to the strange tragedy of which each incident was but a link in the complete chain.

It actually began on the night of Sir Roger's absence. An important letter from Downing Street, from a source which could not be gainsaid, had summoned him to London. A general election was in the air; the party whips were nervous—it was feared that this time a dissolution could not be averted. So Sir Roger went up, taking Stonnard with him. They were to return the following day.

Lady Mercer and Kathleen sat alone in the drawing-room. Stella had gone to her room, and Robert had

disappeared after a rather silent dinner. Lady Mercer was reading, but Kathleen sat lost in thought. Lady Mercer laid aside her book and regarded her protégée for some minutes unobserved. Then she spoke:

“What are you thinking of, Kathleen?”

Kathleen flushed. She had been thinking of Robert and wondering where he was. Lady Mercer gave a shrewd shake of her head.

“Don’t waste your time thinking of Robert, my dear. His is a broken life—never to be mended, I am afraid.”

“It is terribly sad,” said Kathleen simply. “I cannot bear to think of it. Just imagine him after all these years coming home to see his mother and finding her——”

Tears rushed to her dark eyes, but she turned her head away and kept them back with an effort.

“Still, he has only himself to blame for that.”

“I do not look at it in that light now that he has returned,” said Kathleen in a low voice.

“My dear,” returned the old lady, “what would you have? We must take life as we find it, not play fast and loose with it, as Robert has done with his. He has a very strange temperament, though, indeed, I do not blame it for everything that has happened. You never heard how he came to leave England in the first instance, did you?”

Kathleen shook her head. She had often thought about it, and never dared to ask. Now, it seemed, she was to know without asking.

“I always thought his father was a little hard in the matter,” continued Lady Mercer, “though, of course, it’s difficult to say without knowing the facts. But I do know Roger, and I fancy he decided in his mind to play the Spartan father and make a sacrifice of his only son. That’s the worst of your highly moral men, my

dear, they're so dreadfully fond of making examples of other people. It's a form of self-indulgence, really. Highly moral people let their morals run riot, just as some people let their passions run riot. It's all a matter of temperament at bottom.

"But about Robert. There was always some mystery and rumour as to what he did years ago which compelled him to leave England. As a young man he was wild and harum-scarum, but very handsome and charming. I was fond enough of him then, and so was his father. Indeed, it was impossible not to like Robert when he was a young man—some men, like most women, are at their best before they are thirty. You were only a child then, and cannot remember his charm—quite different from the man who has returned, so gloomy-faced and serious at times that he might be a temperance reformer or one of those dreadful people who write articles on morals in the Sunday newspapers. Some of the old charm peeps out at times, but it's not the same.

"Well, as I said, I never knew why he left England. His mother never knew, either—Roger kept the truth from her. I suppose there was a woman at the bottom of it. There usually is when a young man gets into trouble. It must have gone deeper than that, though, or Robert would never have confided the truth to his father. My idea is that some offence against the law was at the back of it, and for that reason Robert was compelled to seek his father's aid.

"Robert came down from London to see his father. I remember it all so well. It was an autumn afternoon, with an east wind blowing and the leaves falling thick in the garden—one of those dull dreary days when one shivers over the fire and deplores the English climate. Robert's mother and I were in the drawing-room. Robert

and his father were closeted in the Painted Room. We could hear the sound of their voices, subdued at first, then louder and angry. The door of the study was flung open, and we heard Roger say, 'Now go; you have disgraced the name of Lynngarth.' I remember thinking at the time how absurd it was of Roger to go on in that way, like the heavy father in a melodrama, for all the servants to hear. Robert's reply was peculiar. 'I'm going,' he said, 'and I shall never return, or we both may regret it.' His mother ran out to him at that, and I followed. I was just in time to see Robert bending over his mother, kissing her. 'Good-bye, mother,' was all he said. The next moment he was gone.

"From the window I watched him striding down the path among the fallen leaves. As he reached the drive I saw him turn round, his white face staring at the house. Sometimes in my dreams I can see again that last look of his."

Kathleen seemed to see that picture too—the winding avenue with dropping leaves, and Robert Lynngarth peering through the leaves at the shuttered house.

"Did Sir Roger never tell any one why Robert left England?" she asked at length.

"No. He has always kept that to himself. He would not even tell his wife when she lay dying, but he did promise to forgive Robert if he ever came back, though I do not think that he has. I suppose when he made that promise he thought Robert would never return. Roger has always placed his tiresome moral standard above everything—before happiness or anything else. The honour of the Lynngarths! That's his creed—his religion. We heard no more of Robert until he dropped from the skies in this unexpected fashion—which is very like him to do. I certainly thought he was dead. Only

his mother clung to the belief that he was alive and would return some day. On her deathbed she asked me to give him her love, her dear love and blessings. She was right after all."

There was silence between them, then Lady Mercer spoke again, in a different tone.

"Sometimes I think it would have been better if Robert had remained away."

"Oh, no, do not say that," said Kathleen in a pained voice.

"My dear," said the old lady kindly, "life is a flimsy thing at best, and twelve years is a big gap out of it. Robert remained silent to please himself, and he cannot come back and pick up the threads where he dropped them. He has changed terribly. He has been so long in the wild parts of the earth that he's no longer a civilized Englishman. He's a wild man now—what the modern female novelist calls a primitive. I fear this resurrection of him. I've strange feelings about him. I've the impression that he sneers at us all in his heart, and that all sorts of dreadful thoughts are surging behind those gloomy eyes of his. They remind me of a wild beast sometimes—a wild beast behind bars. I do hope he won't attempt to break out and eat us all up alive."

She broke off with a laugh at the sight of Kathleen's dismayed face, and added in a different tone:

"I'm talking nonsense, my dear—just teasing you. Robert's a dear fellow, and I love him dearly in spite of his faults, or perhaps because of them. He has a way with him where we are concerned, and so few modern men have a way with women. They insist on treating us as rational beings, which of course we're not—not one of us. Now, Robert idealizes us and regards a pretty face as one of God's good gifts to the world. He's like a

boy catching butterflies in a meadow. One butterfly is very like another."

Lady Mercer stopped and gave the girl one of her shrewd glances. But Kathleen was not looking at her.

"He must have loved his mother very much to come back—after all," said Kathleen. "It was wonderful that her letter should have reached him on the island in that way. It seems almost as though it was meant that he should come back."

"Providence should have interposed earlier, then. It was like Robert Lynngarth to interpret his mother's letter as a sign to return. Perhaps it would have been better if he had not—better for himself and others." Lady Mercer sighed.

Silence fell upon them at that—a silence which was broken at length by the sound of an opening door. Stella entered the room, book in hand, and joined them where they were sitting at the far end of the drawing-room. She took a chair without speaking. She wasted few words where her own sex was concerned. Her golden head drooped over her book. Kathleen looked at her with a sort of wonder at her beauty. She was dazzling and seductive, perfect indeed, but with something mysterious about her. Fragile, yet a creature of flame—what destiny had brought her across the threshold of Redways and made her its mistress?

Lady Mercer, coming out of a deep reverie, looked up sharply.

"What was that noise, Kathleen?"

"I heard nothing, Lady Mercer."

"It sounded like a window rattling. I wonder where Robert is? In the smoking-room, I suppose. The maids have got hold of some preposterous story about—— Ah, here is some one coming; Robert, no doubt."

It was the figure of Robert Lynngarth which appeared in the doorway. Lady Mercer signalled him with a gesture. He approached with a smile, and sat down by her.

"I was just talking of you, Robert, and wishing you'd come in. I feel nervous and out of sorts to-night, and I don't like the idea of a parcel of women sitting alone in this great ghostly room. I wish you'd take a stroll round the garden and smoke a cigar there before you go to bed. One of the maids has a stupid story of a man watching the house last night."

Stella uttered a sudden exclamation. Lady Mercer looked at her kindly.

"No need to get alarmed, my dear. I've not the least doubt that's it's all imagination, but of course the Lynngarth silver is valuable and famous."

"True," replied Robert. "Redways might easily be burgled. Did the maid see anything of this man? Could she recognize him?"

"No. He was standing under the elms by the side of the house wearing some kind of a hood over his face—so she says. It sounds ridiculously improbable."

"Interesting, though. A hooded shape! That suggests the traditional Redways ghost, the old monk of the Abbey, dispossessed by our ancestors—the old chap who is to announce the final tragedy of the house."

"No, no; you've got it wrong," said Kathleen reproachfully. "He never visits Redways in human shape, Robert—you ought to know that. It's only an eye—an intensely malevolent eye which floats into your room and stares at you."

"True, I'd forgotten," said Robert lightly. "But no one has ever seen the eye so far as I know. I fancy the ghost story originated with the other eye, the one over

the mantelpiece in the Painted Room, which used to terrify me when I was a child. I can well believe it would wander round the house, prying into all the rooms, if it could."

"We are talking a great deal of nonsense about ghosts," said Lady Mercer good-humouredly. "Do be practical, Robert, for once. If you will go round the house before going to bed, I should certainly feel easier."

"Yes, I'll do that," said Robert.

"No, no; do not." The speaker was Stella. She looked from Lady Mercer to Robert with a dismayed face. "It would not be safe—you might be hurt. Oh, please, don't."

She advanced tremblingly towards him, and the expression upon her face was an unconscious revelation to eyes which could read it aright—the look of a woman who had forgotten all things except one. Robert glanced at her irresolutely. The gaze of Lady Mercer was bent upon them both. It was she who spoke.

"I do not think Robert is putting himself into any danger, Stella," she remarked coldly.

Stella, looking up, caught Robert's eyes fixed upon her warningly. That look recalled her to herself quicker than Lady Mercer's words, which, perhaps, she had not heard. She got herself in hand at once, seemingly without an effort. Her arm dropped to her side, and the excitement died out of her face, leaving it listless and enigmatic as ever.

"I am nervous and silly to-night," she murmured, with a submissive glance in Lady Mercer's direction.

Robert did not look at her again. After a moment or two he arose from his seat and, with a vague gesture in the direction of the garden, left the room.

CHAPTER XI

THE NAILS OF FATE

OUTSIDE the air was heavy with a brooding thunder-storm, and the garden a mere outline of un-stirring shapes. Robert stood on the terrace until his eyes became accustomed to the gloom and then stepped down into the garden. His footsteps fell noiselessly on the velvet lawn.

He walked towards a group of elms at the side of the house, where a small gate led from the garden into the wood. When he reached it he paused to light a cigar, then rested his arms on the gate, looking around him.

The peace of the night stretched undisturbed before him. The solitude and silence betrayed no hint of intrusion. The trees appeared vaguely menacing in the obscurity, but their menace was not human, though the complete darkness of the woods might have been peopled with burglars lying in wait for the Lynngarth silver. Robert did not expect to see any one. The story told by Lady Mercer was not in his mind, which was fixed on other things. He remained motionless by the white gate, staring into the gloom. He moved slightly as he became aware of a gleam of light in the depth of the obscurity before him. It showed brighter, a faint flickering glow, twinkling from some house beyond the wood and near the river. Robert knew that it came from the lame game-keeper's cottage. After a moment's hesitation he opened the gate, and walked through the darkness of the woods towards the river.

He emerged by the river bank, and following the murmuring stream to the alder pool, left the path and struck across the flats to the solitary cottage at the end of the lane. The light he had seen from the gate came from a small sitting-room, and through the uncurtained window Robert beheld the gamekeeper within, seated at the table, crutch beside him, engaged in skinning a small bird with a knife. The shaded light beside him fell on his dark, intent face, and the small bundle of feathers which his long fingers were manipulating.

He was so engrossed in his taxidermy that a light tap on the pane passed unnoticed. Robert knocked again, and louder. The gamekeeper looked up quickly, and the eyes of the two men met through the window. The man within rose and hopped to the door and opened it. He looked at his visitor questioningly, but without surprise.

"I want a few words with you," said Robert.

The gamekeeper jumped back, leaving the way free for his visitor to enter. Robert followed him into the small room with its rows of caged birds. A parrot in a wicker-cage uttered an exclamation almost human in tone and looked down menacingly from its perch.

The gamekeeper put the lamp back on the table and swung round on his crutch with a hissing breath, his eyes on Robert's face.

"Well?" he said. "What do you want?"

"I have been trying to see you for some time past."

"I had to go to London—about this." He touched his bent leg. "Sir Roger lets me go up and down to have it doctored. I came back by the evening train."

Robert appeared to hesitate. Then he said:

"You have been abroad?"

"Who told you that?" asked the gamekeeper quickly.

"Nobody. I guessed it. I thought so the first time I met you—that day at the old tower. You remember?"

The other nodded. "You're right," he said. "I've roved the world a bit—knocked about till I got this." He pulled down a woollen stocking he was wearing, and exposed a dangling lower limb encased in plaster of Paris, with a blue distorted foot protruding from it. The limb suggested deformity without any visible malformation. Its owner regarded it with a sort of savage disdain. "That put a stop to my galloping," he said.

"I suppose so. Where did you get it?"

"At Gallipoli—in the war."

Robert looked at him with a new interest.

"What took you to Gallipoli?"

"Adventure, if you like, or because I was a fool, like many others."

"And you brought away that crippled leg?"

"Smashed with shrapnel," he said, feeling it gingerly. "The doctors have been fooling about with me ever since, but they can't get it right. Something wrong with the bone. It's been X-rayed and all that sort of thing. The chap who's treating me now at a London hospital thinks he can cure me, though, so that's something to look forward to. He says he'll have it out of plaster of Paris in another three months."

He took down a chevalier pipe from the wall, filled it, and went on:

"Time it was too. I brought it back from the war like that, and hopped through England till I came here, when Sir Roger put me on as a gamekeeper, and gave me this cottage to live in."

"How did Sir Roger come to engage a maimed man like you as gamekeeper," asked Robert, with a keen glance.

"Perhaps because he's got more charity than a lot of so-called Christians," answered the other, coolly enough. "I'll not deny that the job's made easy for me, but I can do my work all right. But that's neither here nor there. I don't suppose you came here to talk about my job."

"I did not. I came to ask you a question."

"Ask it, then."

"When I met you, the day after my return from abroad, you mentioned a name—the name of James Raymond."

"And if I did?"

"Did you know James Raymond?"

"A man meets a good many people of all sorts travelling round the world."

"That may be, but it seems to me that you had some particular object in mentioning this name to me."

"I don't see what it has to do with you, Mr. Lynngarth."

"It has, as I fancy you know very well. I knew James Raymond."

"Where?"

"At Gallipoli."

"You were there too?"

"Yes. And James Raymond was killed there."

"What has this to do with me?"

"Because I'd like you to tell me where you knew James Raymond, and why you mentioned his name to me that day."

"I never knew any James Raymond," said the game-keeper sullenly. "If I mentioned that name to you, it was just a chance."

"That would be too much of a coincidence," replied Robert. "You had better tell me, or I warn you——"

"Are you threatening me, Mr. Lynngarth?"

"No; but I ask you to tell me the truth about James Raymond. What do you know of him, and what led you to mention his name?"

"As God is my judge," cried the other solemnly, "I don't know what you mean. Raymond is a common enough name, Mr. Lynngarth, and, if I mentioned it, it was by chance. This seems a great to-do about nothing, if I may say so. What's the name of Raymond to you, when it brings you here to threaten a gamekeeper on your father's estate. You'll get nothing more out of me if you stay here all night, because there's nothing more I can tell you."

"Very well, but if that's your answer you force me to form certain conclusions of my own," said Robert.

"Think what you like, but I've spoken truth," rejoined the other undauntedly. He remained poised on his crutch, motionless, his dark eyes fixed warily on his visitor. But his words and demeanour had been submissive enough, and Robert realized that he was too deep for him. Cursing himself for a fool, he turned short on his heel and left the cottage without another word. He heard the gamekeeper hopping to fasten the door behind him, and as he turned to close the garden gate the man was back at the table, bending over his half-skinned bird again.

Robert strode back to the house deep in thought, and went straight upstairs to his room. The hour was not late, but he wished to be alone, and to think. He was oppressed by a sense of peril, and when he did seek slumber his imagination was disturbed, and it was some time before he could sleep.

When sleep did come he stirred uneasily in the grip of a vivid dream. He was aware of a high and lonely building by the side of a river—a great block divided into two parts, with an iron staircase descending like a cork-

screw on one side into a courtyard at the foot, where a single gas-jet flared in the wind. Down this staircase a man was running madly, as if pursued by fear, occasionally glancing backwards over his shoulder, up into the darkness above. Half-way down the last flight he put his hand on the railing, vaulted over the stairs into the courtyard below, and disappeared like a flash into the darkness of the street outside.

From this dream Robert Lynngarth awoke as if his eyelids had been plucked apart, and sat up in bed with head thrust forward, like a man still listening to the clatter of those receding footsteps down the wind-swept street. Sleeping or waking, that dream had enslaved his memory for the past twelve years. For the vision was a true one, and the man was himself.

He lay there tossing in the darkness for some time, but sleep refused to come again. That dream had put it to flight, as it had so often before. At length he arose, and switching on the light sank into a chair by his bedside.

Thoughts crowded upon him and besieged his weary brain. A host of questions arose to his mind—strange questions to which he could find no answer. To escape from them he took a volume at random from a shelf of bedside books, but he found it impossible to read. His mind reverted persistently to the perplexities by which he was beset.

He saw himself once again assailed by mysterious dangers which he could neither ward off nor withstand. He brooded upon the past with the feeling that he was on the brink of a similar fateful moment to the one which had driven him out of England long before. He had returned after twelve years to be enmeshed in the same web of Fate's weaving—the fool of Chance, now, as then! A disturbing and awesome thing to contemplate, truly.

The difference was that so far the law had been respected. If tragedy followed—and only the silent heavens knew what the fates were plotting—the horrible coincidence would be complete.

In the chain of circumstances which entangled him there was something so mysteriously premeditated, so deliberately planned, that he shrank from the contemplation of it, as if a glimpse of the awful mechanism of the universe had been unveiled to his distracted gaze. But in this instance the tremendous machinery had been set in motion to crush a human creature not worth crushing. There was an absurd lack of proportion in such an act of Fate, yet how else was the sum of events to be interpreted?

Could anything have been stranger than for him to return and meet Stella again as his father's wife, and a Stella unchanged? Could no other man have been found for her in the whole wide world? Then there was that gamekeeper in the cottage by the river. Who was he, and what did he know? He had given himself away to no purpose there, and had extracted nothing of the man's knowledge of James Raymond. His explanation of a chance utterance of that name was, of course, ridiculous, but for some reason the gamekeeper now wished to reassure him and remove his suspicions. In that case, why had he mentioned the name to him at the tower on the morning after his return? These were questions to which he could find no answer, but he had the feeling that the man who said his name was John Wells was in some way part of the coil in which he was caught. What obscure purpose lay behind it all he could not guess, but there was a veiled malignity in it which filled him with a sense of horror. It was like walking in a jungle where hidden snakes lurked.

What ought he to do? That was a question he had asked himself before, and the answer was plain. A secret voice within him warned him to be gone. "Go," it cried insistently. "Go at once, before disaster comes." Yet, knowing this, he hesitated. He had a reason ready; an excuse perhaps; the excuse of a weary heart which longs in spite of itself.

Reason? What had he to do with such thoughts? It was his duty to go, and immediately. Each day added to the danger, not only for himself, but for Stella.

He filled his pipe, lit it, and sat back gazing upwards. From the ceiling the throng of robed angels which gave his bedroom its name looked down upon him. Their soft painted eyes met his in divine pity. But there was one with outstretched arms, like an angel crucified. Humanity was crucified too, for that matter—nailed to the cross of life, but crucifixion twice in a lifetime was more than a grim joke. Human endurance was limited, and a man could only stand so much. When the nails were in, one endured it, but to tear open wounds after twelve years and drive fresh nails into the same raw holes . . .

He took himself impatiently to task. What did it matter after all? There was an end to all things. We were born to suffer, all in our appointed ways—some in one way, and some in another. Apparently humanity came into this world for no other purpose than to be crucified by Fate. The ancients believed that too. What did Horace say?

"Inexorable Doom before thee fares,
Beam-rivets in her brazen hand she bears."

Beam-rivets—the nails of Fate! Yes, the metaphor was apt enough. Fate was like an immense unseen hand,

for ever at work hammering the human race to its cross.

The nails of Fate! Drowsily he allowed his imagination to dwell on the theme. He seemed to picture giant hands clutching and nailing down. Thud, thud, thud! The sound of Fate's hammer fell mechanically and perpetually through the mysterious universe of human suffering. And, thinking thus, sleep came to him swiftly and suddenly, overtaking him in the midst of his sombre thoughts.

He awoke as suddenly as he had fallen asleep. In some bewilderment he sat up, casting his eyes about him. The light still burned, the angels looked down from the ceiling, and a clock on the mantelpiece proclaimed the lateness of the hour. In the stillness he thought he could hear a sound like distant hammering, and his last waking thought came back to him. He listened intently. Yes; there could be no doubt about it—somewhere in the distance there was a faint thudding sound, as of an unseen Fate at work.

"Nonsense, I'm getting morbid, brooding over this thing," he muttered to himself.

He listened again, rather disquieted. For a moment he could hear nothing, and then it recommenced, coming from somewhere outside, though he could not determine where. The idea of Fate at work was replaced by one equally grotesque. The noise in some way reminded him of a distant episode in his wandering career—of a night when he had camped by a lonely lake in the Australian bush. He had been awakened by just such a sound, and had raised the flap of his tent in time to see the grey shape of a kangaroo flopping away into the bush.

He smiled at the idea of a kangaroo leaping about in the quiet solitude of the Hampshire country-side, but the noise outside certainly reminded him of it. He could

hear the odd, methodical flop distinctly. It seemed to be coming nearer, from the park into the garden. As he listened another explanation came to him to account for the noise, and that was the story Lady Mercer had told him of the man seen by the maid from the window. A man with his face hidden, according to the maid's account. Did hooded shapes progress in this manner? It was probably a thief after the silver.

Noiselessly he approached the window, and looked out. At that instant the sound ceased. He looked out into the night. The thunderclouds had cleared away, and in the clearer air he could make out the outline of the garden and the indistinct shape of the bronze girl struggling with her dolphin. But he could see nothing like a human form.

He stood at the window watching, and then fell into another reverie. Time passed as he stood there, but the silence remained unbroken. Finally, with a sigh, he came to himself, and turned away. As he crossed the room to switch off the light he saw something which had not been there before: a white square patch clearly revealed against the dark green background of the carpet. It was an envelope, which must have been thrust under the door while he was at the window. He stooped and picked it up. It was a closed envelope without superscription, and the back bore the Lynngarth crest. Even before he opened it and saw the handwriting on the half-sheet within he knew that this secret epistle was from his father's wife.

CHAPTER XII

A MEETING IN THE CHURCHYARD

IN the churchyard encircled with yews Robert Lynn-garth waited. The clock in the church tower struck three, and his watch confirmed the hour. How like Stella to select such a meeting-place and then not come!

He retraced his steps slowly between the old head-stones and more pretentious memorials, but stopped when he reached the spot where his mother was buried.

She was the first to lie in the new family vault. The son for whom she had waited so long and vainly stood by it now, his mind filled with thoughts of her, wondering if she were lonely and afraid in that damp, cold place. What did the living know of the thoughts of the dead? Perhaps they started up in the dark, crying out piteously in fear, with none to heed or care. . . . Ah, the living were frail and helpless, but the dead more helpless still.

Her name and age were cut deep at the top of a square granite column. Then came a blank space for those who would follow in the course of time. His own name would not be there. He and she would be divided in death, as in life. His eyes, darkening at that thought, dwelt sombrely upon the inscription at the foot of the column:

“O death, where is thy sting?
O grave, where is thy victory?”

The victory and the sting? Alas, they were there—both. Not for the dead—no. The barb was in the quivering flesh, the victory over the living.

He turned to leave the churchyard, but saw his father's second wife entering the gate. Across the grassy mounds she made her way towards him. His lips tightened at the idea of a meeting in that spot, and he moved a little farther away. No scruple of that kind was in her mind, and her face lit up with eagerness as she drew near. She stepped over a forgotten grave to his side.

"You received my note?" she asked.

"Would I be here otherwise?" he answered her.

"I had to see you, Jim," she murmured.

"What good can come of it?" he said in reply.

"I have had no chance—no real chance—to speak to you since your return," she went on. "Jim, why do you avoid me?"

"Is not that best, for all our sakes?" he rejoined a little wearily. "It was folly on your part to meet me here. Don't you know that the churchyard is overlooked from the house?" He pointed to the upper windows of Redways, which gleamed down at them from a distance.

"I do not care for that," she recklessly retorted, "so long as I can see you and speak to you. I cannot go on like this. I shall do something desperate, I think."

"You are doing that at the present moment by meeting and talking with me here in this way."

"There's no one to see or overhear me, Jim, except that robin on a tombstone with a worm in his mouth, and he won't tell any one."

She smiled up into his face, and he smiled faintly in reply.

"You are rather childish, Stella, for Lady Lynngarth."

"Don't!" she interrupted sharply. "Jim, I want to talk to you——"

He looked around him apprehensively. "We cannot talk here."

"But I must. There is no chance in the house. Some one seems to be always near us, and I am afraid of Lady Mercer."

"We had better go into the church, then," he said. "Not that it is particularly safe, either, but at least we shall not be overlooked there from the house." He moved towards the church as he spoke.

She gave him a bitter glance. "You seem very nervous."

"For myself—no," was his response. "But there is your reputation to be considered."

"My reputation?" She echoed the word with a strange laugh.

"Your reputation is the reputation of the Lynngarths—now," he reminded her simply, opening the church door for her to enter.

"I care nothing for that!" she retorted defiantly. "Not when I am with you."

The ponderous door closed heavily behind them and they were alone in the old grey church where so many Lynngarths slept, indifferent to the disconcerting activity of existence. Stella looked into Robert Lynngarth's grave face triumphantly, and eagerly cried:

"At last, Jim, I have you to myself. Your ancestors won't mind!"

Her clear sweet voice came ringing back from the grey walls. Then, drawing back a little and making him a mock curtsy, she began to dance, easily and slowly at first, then quicker, gyrating swiftly and beautifully, with all the lightness and grace of a professional dancer. The old church had probably never witnessed a stranger sight. Faster and faster she went, her breath coming quickly, her colour heightening. Her feet made no sound on the flagged pavement. Robert Lynngarth watched her in

silence. With a final pirouette she came to a standstill upon a worn stone which covered a long-dead Lynngarth, and danced towards Robert, on her toes, her face thrown back, her little hands held together in front of her face.

"Does that remind you of Dawnia, Jim—of the first night you saw me?" she asked.

"You are dreadfully imprudent," was his rejoinder.

"No one here knows that I can dance—except you. I felt just now that I had to dance—or to go mad. Jim, I hate my life here."

"You should try and forget the past—try and be happy."

"Happy?" She echoed the word rather drearily. "What is there here to make me happy?" She looked round the church and through a darkened window at the old, grey garden of the dead. He followed her look.

"Not in the churchyard certainly. Content is the lot of those who lie there—not happiness. But your life has much in it, Stella."

"Not now that you are back."

He considered this, and sighed. "I seem doomed to upset somebody's happiness wherever I go. That can easily be remedied this time. I will go away again."

"Oh, no, no! Do not leave me, Jim. Promise me that you won't."

The clock above their heads struck four, and the sound of the four strokes clanged solemnly through the empty stillness of the church.

"Four o'clock!" said Robert Lynngarth in dismay. "Stella, if this is all you have to say to me, we had better go. It would not do for us to be seen here."

He turned, as he spoke, towards the door of the church, and opened it. She came after him quickly, and laid her hand upon his arm.

"Jim," she said.

He looked round at her. She was glancing at him with one of her rare smiles—a smile few men could resist, Robert Lynngarth least of all. "I haven't said all I want to say to you—yet," she told him.

He hesitated. Her wistful beauty and starry eyes moved him deeply at that moment. She was his father's wife, but she was also a woman. As he hesitated whether to go or stay, the inherent weakness of his temperament where women were concerned rose to overthrow him. There was a recklessness in her whole attitude which appealed to him strongly, because it chimed in with his own outlook on life; and like calls to like. His weakness where women were concerned sprang not so much from sexual feeling as from a realization of their utter fragility and defencelessness in the face of the basic facts of existence—like butterflies floating gaily in sunshine indifferent to the menace of the coming storm. He believed that men had a better sense of the tremendous insecurity of things. Moreover, they had no painted wings to lose. He had a profound pity for the more fragile sex, all under sentence of death, despite their pretty airs and graces. He looked at Stella seriously, and stopped—in spite of himself.

"Well?" he asked, as she did not immediately speak.

"Jim——"

She broke off abruptly, and the moment of silence which ensued was one fully charged with importance to both of them. He waited patiently for her to pick up the thread of her words. She went on with drooped eyes, her colour coming and going, as if in fear.

"Jim, Marist knows. He is in England."

Robert started, and released his hold of the door, which swung slightly open.

"Do you really mean that?" His eyes were grave.

Still she could not summon courage to look at him, but nodded slowly.

"And have you seen him?"

Again, her reply was a nod.

"Has he been molesting you?"

"Yes," she whispered. "Oh, Jim, I am afraid—afraid. What am I to do?" She looked up now—looked up imploringly—and came closer. There was a lengthy pause.

"You had better tell my father the truth—or some of it," said Robert sombrely.

"I dare not," she whispered back.

"I said some of it," he rejoined. "It is the best thing to do. My father loves you. He will forgive you. Then you will be safe."

"But, Jim, Marist knows—about you."

He recoiled a step, looking at her strangely.

"That cannot be," he said. "I never saw him."

"You forget." She spoke gently, but her eyes were wide. "You never saw his face, because he wore that animal skin, but he saw you, sitting in the front seat on that night, looking at me. And afterwards he found out that I went away with you."

"Even so, what difference does that make?"

"Because he also knows that you are back—and here."

He was puzzled, and showed his wonderment.

"But he does not know that James Raymond is Robert Lynngarth. He could not."

"You forget that he has seen you, although you haven't seen him," she reminded him with a frightened look.

"And he knows that you are here."

"He cannot know that unless he is here." He spoke coldly, his eyes probing her. Then recollection, like a flash, brought swift suspicion to him, and he believed he

saw the whole incredible truth. "Where is he—Marist?" he asked.

Courage fled before his eyes. She tried to think.

"In London."

"Then you had better give me his address and let me go up and deal with him."

"No, no, Jim! I dare not do that. It would be of no use, and would only make it worse for me. I am afraid of him."

He eyed her keenly, sternly.

"Stella, you are not telling me the truth. He is not in London—he is here."

"No, Jim," she replied hurriedly, "he is in London. He writes from there, and I send him money to a post office address. He could not come down here—it would not be safe." She twisted her hands nervously, still shrinking from his look. "Oh, Jim, you must believe me. I am telling you the truth. Do you believe me?"

"Yes, I believe you," he answered.

He did not. His experience of her sex led him to think that a man was a fool who expected a woman to tell him the whole truth about herself. That, however, was a small thing compared to the catastrophe which threatened them both. For himself he did not care. His chief concern was for her. Fate had indeed played a cat-and-mouse game with her. He could see the shadow of the lifted paw, ready to strike her down. Tenderness stirred within him. How could she be saved?

"If you could bring yourself to tell the truth to your husband," he said earnestly. "That would be best in the long run. After all——"

"No, no!" Her voice rang out passionately. "I could not. Do not ask me."

Silence fell between them again. The door of the church swung unregarded in the wind.

"It is your fault." She turned on him stormily. "Why did you send me away from you? Why did you send me back to England?"

"I wish now that I had never returned to England myself."

"Ah, no, no! Do not say that! Think of me. Even to see you like this, to know that you are near me, is something. It helps me—a little—to bear the other thing. Jim, you will not leave me?"

He wanted to tell her that it was the best thing to do, the best for both, that, indeed, he had stayed in England too long already. But he stood there irresolute at the sight of her piteous and pleading face, angry with himself, but not with her. He had at least the merit of tenderness where her sex was concerned—the tenderness of an impulsive temperament, which is at times akin to brutality.

She knew him, and read him aright. She came closer to him, her face uplifted, looking in the darkened light of the old church like some rare piece of carved ivory—like a supplicating Virgin. Then she swiftly kissed him on the lips, and clung to him, sobbing.

A slight crunching on the gravel outside startled them. Stella fell back, shame flaming in her cheeks, eyes bright and wide.

"There is some one there," she whispered.

Robert nodded without speaking. Too late he blamed himself for forgetting that partly open door. In silence they stood listening. Then they heard the sound again, and footsteps went past the church door.

The sound of the steps died away, and Robert, looking forth, saw a figure making for the churchyard gate. It

was his father. He reached the gate and passed through without a backward glance.

Robert returned to Stella, standing a few paces from the door.

"Did you see who it was?" she asked, a little breathlessly.

"Yes," he said. "It was your husband—my father."

Colour mounted in her cheeks again, but this time with fear.

"Do you think he heard—or saw us?" she whispered.

"How can I say?" he replied simply.

How could he say, in truth? A man's back may be eloquent in silence, but it does not reveal its owner's thoughts. Sir Roger's back, seen vanishing in the distance, had been strictly non-committal, hanging out no signals to the eyes watching it from the porch. Robert, knowing nothing whatever of that back's yea or nay, yet believed the worst, because it was his temperament to do so. But it was equally part of his temperament to reassure the anxious woman at his side with a smiling untruth—an untruth so far as his own opinion was concerned.

"I do not think so," he said.

Her face cleared up immediately, like a child who has been needlessly frightened.

"No, I do not think so, either," she replied. "He would have come in, wouldn't he?"

"I think you had better go home, Stella," he said.

She timidly assented. "Yes, I suppose so."

"You had better go through the far gate, by the fir plantation," he counselled her. "Then you are not likely to meet." She turned away submissively, but shrank back in alarm at the sight of Sir Roger retracing his steps towards the door of the church.

CHAPTER XIII

AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

HIS glance dwelt coldly on his son, ignoring the presence of his wife. Her frightened eyes were set on his face, but she could read nothing there. Robert remained like a figure carved in stone, waiting for his father to speak. The folly of commencing an explanation was manifest to him, at least. Sir Roger broke the silence.

"I overheard, unwittingly, a fragment of your conversation while passing the church a few minutes ago," he said, in a measured colourless voice, addressing himself entirely to his son. "I thought at first to defer explanations until you returned to the house, but on second thoughts it will be wiser to speak to you here."

"Very well, father."

There was something about this formal acceptance of an equivocal situation which terrified the girl who was watching both men. Her feminine instinct prompted her to try and save appearances—to give a conventional aspect to a situation beyond redemption.

"Roger! Roger!" she cried. "You are making a mistake. There was nothing—wrong. I was telling him—telling Robert—that I felt a little lonely at times—in England. He is your son—he has travelled—he is sympathetic—and understanding——"

"His sympathy was apparent to me—as I came in," her husband gravely assured her. "You had better leave us, Stella."

His passionless acceptance of whatever he had overheard struck more fear into her heart than any outburst of mere anger would have done. She did not understand that his birth and breeding forbade such elementary form of relief: that he could no more have raved at her than struck her. The long process of making a gentleman generally ensures dignity and restraint in moments of stress. It was strange, too, that the same process curbed the more tempestuous disposition of Robert Lynngarth, so father and son met on the same plane. It was a height too lofty for Stella's comprehension. She was cast in more emotional—more undisciplined—mould. She glanced at their impassive faces distractedly.

"Tell him—Robert—tell him there was nothing. Oh, how can you stand still without saying a word?"

In her terror and bewilderment she was incapable of perceiving that her own frantic attitude was more suggestive of guilt than the coldly distracted air of the man she addressed. That, at least, had the merit of being non-committal. But she had a more powerful ally than he could command. Her beauty did not fail her at that moment. She looked a creature of distracting loveliness in her abandon and fear; in her despair at this appalling menace to the security of her existence. The spectacle of her appealing loveliness had its effect on both men. The implacable lines of her husband's face softened a little as he looked at her.

"I shall not condemn you unheard, Stella"—his voice was unconsciously milder—"nor will I judge you harshly. There will be time enough to appeal to me when I do. But you had better leave us now. I wish to speak to Robert."

He held the door open for her in a manner not to be gainsaid. Slowly, and with hesitating steps, she passed

out. At the last moment she cast a glance at Robert Lynngarth over her shoulder—a look which her husband was unable to see. That wide-eyed glance conveyed an appeal—an unspoken prayer to him to save her from the folly of her own act. He read it aright, and nodded reassuringly in reply. Then the door closed on her, and Sir Roger returned to where his son was standing.

“Now that we are alone, I shall be glad if you will give me the opportunity to explain,” said Robert, speaking earnestly and rapidly.

“I need no explanation,” was the cold response. “Sufficient for me to know that you are unchanged.”

“All the more reason for you to hear me, then, for your wife’s sake. Believe me, I have no wish to justify myself. That would be impossible—in your eyes. As you have just said, I am unchanged. For me, nothing matters, nor can I be held accountable for a temperament which came with me into the world. Your wife is different. She is in a false position where I am concerned.”

“In what respect?” His father’s tone was of the driest.

“I happen to know, to have learnt”—Robert picked his words carefully—“something concerning an episode in her life before she reached England. A small thing, really, which hardly concerns you or affects your happiness. But, because I do know this, my presence at Redways is awkward, and a source of embarrassment to your wife. Perhaps it would have been better to have informed you of this in the first instance—when I came back.”

“Perhaps it would.” Irony tinged Sir Roger’s voice. “Why tell me now?”

“I must, but Lady Lynngarth did not wish you to know before. She thought you would be angered. This afternoon I was endeavouring to persuade her that it would

be better for her to inform you. It was a portion of that conversation which you overheard." He looked at his father to see the effect of these words, but Sir Roger's face was inscrutable.

"You met by appointment—here?" he said sharply, glancing round him.

"Not here—in the churchyard," rejoined his son. "We walked into the church to discuss the matter."

Sir Roger looked at him attentively. "Your story means that you have met my wife—abroad?"

Robert bowed his head.

"That accounts for the questions you asked me when you saw her picture in my room. Why did you not tell me then—on the day of your arrival—that you had met before?"

"I could not—not without her consent. There were circumstances known to me alone; a confidence she had entrusted to me."

Sir Roger looked at his son as if he would pierce the secret of his heart. Robert bore the look steadily. His father spoke again.

"I will not go so far as to say that I disbelieve you utterly in this. I have not that right, because I do not know. But I know you, and for that reason I'm compelled to mistrust you. Strange how mystery and unhappiness dog your footsteps wherever you go! I have not forgotten—nor have you—why you had to leave England. After staying away twelve years, you return to plunge me again in fresh perplexity and suspicion—suspicion of you. You should have revealed this matter to me, whatever it is. That was your plain duty, and I cannot understand your attitude of secrecy. Let us leave my wife out of it. You accept full responsibility, and have declared yourself solely to blame. From my past experi-

ence I need, unhappily, very little assurance on that point. I shall endeavour—though not for your sake—to banish any deeper and, perhaps, unworthy suspicions which came into my mind as I heard you talking. But if I do that I must insist upon one thing, which your own common sense should tell you is the best course you can pursue, for all our sakes. You must leave Redways immediately.”

Robert nodded. “Yes; I was going to suggest that myself. Perhaps you will recall that I wished to leave Redways as soon as I returned and learnt that Mother was dead.”

“As I said at the time, that course, by provoking gossip, would have been indiscreet. The reason exists no longer. You’ve now been back long enough to permit of your departure without setting all the local tongues wagging. There’ll be talk undoubtedly, but not to the same extent as if you had rushed off again on the very night that you returned. At least you have stayed long enough to give your visit the colour of—a filial duty. It only remains for us to hit upon some excuse which will sound like a plausible reason for your leaving England again.”

“It could be given out that I have gone to develop my gold-mine in New Guinea.”

“Your gold-mine? Oh, that after-dinner talk!” Sir Roger considered this. “Yes; that would do. Perhaps it might be possible to place an Imperial construction on the idea, if you will actually develop the mine.”

“I will take any one there, if it is your wish. A small party would be best, if you want to develop the field.”

“Make a small expedition, an Imperial expedition, of it? That would be a very good plan. Your interests as the discover would be preserved. We could make you the largest shareholder.”

"I do not want shares," his son answered indifferently. "I'm better without money. I shall return to my island. I'm out of harm's way there with the birds."

"Very well. That is your own business. You had better stay away from England."

"That is my intention."

"Then this will probably be our last interview, so you had better know my plans concerning you. I will settle an adequate allowance upon you, to be paid quarterly through my bankers, to any address you care to name. Wait!" He checked his son's passionate refusal with a gesture. "The sum will be there whether you choose to avail yourself of it or not. After my death Redways comes to you, but very little money. The place is entailed, but the bulk of my fortune is at my own disposal."

"I do not care for your money," said his son. "My only regret is for Redways. Of course I can never occupy it—as you know. It is a pity we can't break the entail."

"That is impossible."

They stood in silence for a moment before Robert spoke again.

"I am sorry that this has happened. I wish, for your sake, father, that it had not. I regret that I ever came back."

"Perhaps you do—now." Sir Roger's face was adamant. "'Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.' I shall not shrink from the additional burden which your folly—to call it by no worse name—has laid upon my shoulders. Now, let us discuss the business details of this New Guinea expedition. Will a thousand pounds be sufficient to finance it? I will pay the preliminary expenses of course—steamer fares, outfit, and that sort of thing. If the sum I mention is sufficient, it shall

be handed to you as you are leaving England. You had better go to London to-morrow to make preparations for your impending journey. There will be no need for you to return to Redways. That course will obviate any—any awkwardness after what has happened this afternoon. See Baron when you reach London, and he will advance the money necessary for your own outfit.”

His son stopped him there. “There is no need to treat me like a pauper. I have some money of my own—certainly enough to take me out of England.”

“I am treating you as my son.” Sir Roger spoke coldly. “For all concerned it is better that this matter should be so arranged. At least it gives a semblance of business to your departure. That, I think, is all. Now, if you will accompany me back to the house, I will have the necessary letters sent off at once.”

Father and son left the church together and turned homeward. There was no further talk between them. Sir Roger walked a little apart, his head bent forward, and his hands clasped behind him. His son viewed the scene through which they were passing as one looks upon a familiar sight for the last time. The old house, the spacious garden, the green fields and the murmuring river: he took them all in with earnest eyes, as if seeking to engrave them upon his memory for the remainder of his life.

When they reached the house, Sir Roger went towards his study after telling the servant who admitted them to inform his secretary that he wanted him. Stonnard came promptly.

“I want two letters to go by the evening post, Stonnard.” The master of the house, having got thus far, hesitated, while the secretary waited alert and upright. “Write to Baron, and tell him that my son will call on him to-morrow, and that he is to advance him two hundred

pounds.” Again Sir Roger paused, then went on quickly: “My son is leaving England again, Stonnard.”

The secretary’s eyebrows showed polite interest. “Indeed?”

“Yes. He is going at—er—my wish, to acquire important mining interests in one of our new colonies. It is an Imperial matter of some importance, and expedition is desirable. He will have to take the steamer leaving England next week.”

“The *Poowoomba*, round the Cape,” put in his son coolly.

“Ah—quite so.” Sir Roger did not venture to pronounce the outlandish name with which his son had so glibly supplied him. “There are certain formalities—business formalities—which we have just been discussing. The second letter is to Prothero and Dickson, about a letter of credit.” Sir Roger dictated it, and added: “You had better tell Baron that I should be glad if he would come down to Redways next week and see me.”

The secretary nodded, made a rapid note, and glanced from father to son. Then he broke the silence by asking if that was all.

“Yes; and you’ll be sure the letters go by the evening post, Stonnard?”

“I quite understand.” Stonnard was about to turn away, but Sir Roger spoke again.

“This is not a confidential matter, Stonnard,” he said, looking into space. “I mention this in case there are questions—inquiries—about Mr. Lynngarth’s departure. We are engaged upon an enterprise in which it is essential to act speedily, and therefore my son will leave Redways to-morrow.”

“So soon?” There was a touch of curiosity in Stonnard’s voice.

"Next week's boat is best. The one after might be too late." The smooth falsehood was in Robert's voice. "That doesn't give me much time to prepare for a journey to the other end of the world, you know."

Stonnard looked interested. "Is it that mine you spoke of?"

"Yes; we are going to develop it."

"Well, that's all right. I think you're wise too. You're a lucky beggar, and I should like to go out with you myself." His tone belied his words and, with a smile, he left the room to write the two letters. Sir Roger glanced at his son.

"I presume that you will take the morning train up?"

"Yes."

"Then I shall not see you when you go." Sir Roger spoke slowly. "This will be the last time we shall meet alone, for I have some important letters to write after dinner."

"In a word, this is our final good-bye," said his son.

"Yes." Sir Roger appeared to be considering something, then lifted his head sharply, like a man who has made up his mind. "I have not yet said all that I have to say to you, Robert." His face went suddenly white. "Sit down, but first close that door and lock it."

Robert wonderingly complied, then returned to his chair and waited for his father to speak.

"I saw Stella kiss you this afternoon," was Sir Roger's abrupt commencement, and anguish stared out of his eyes.

CHAPTER XIV

TO-MORROW?

THERE were no angry voices upon this occasion, as there had been twelve years before. The Painted Room remained silent as a vault. Then, when the door opened, Robert Lynngarth came forth alone with a sad and thoughtful face. An hour had passed, and preparations for dinner were astir. He walked slowly through an empty hall, and went upstairs to dress.

In an embrasured window on the first floor his eye fell upon the figure of Kathleen. She was standing with her back towards him, looking out upon the garden. He hesitated in passing her, and presently turned back. Longing was in his look: a longing which swallowed up his bitterness, and caused him to dwell on the soft lines of her youth and charm with a kind of sad tenderness. Approaching a step nearer, he uttered her name.

She turned quickly, and smiled as she saw him. "I dressed for dinner early. Sir Roger hates any one to be late."

His hesitation was but momentary. He had to tell her, and he could not hope for a better opportunity.

"I have something to tell you, Lady Fibbets. I am going away."

The smile faded from her face, and the colour too. "Going away!" She breathed rather than echoed the words. "Oh, Robert, where?"

"Back to my obscurity—to my home," he answered with a faint smile. "Back to my island."

A feeling of desolation gripped her and left her numb. She searched his face, but found no consolation there.

"Why—why are you going?" she managed to say.

"It would be more difficult to say why I came back," he rejoined, endeavouring to speak lightly. "That was the mistake. Believe me, it is all for the best."

Her heart protested passionately at this platitude, but her lips said nothing.

"I go to London by the early train to-morrow, to see about an outfit. I shall sail next week."

She was startled from her apathy now, and raised pained eyes to his.

"To-morrow! But you will return again—before—before——"

He filled in her hesitation. "Before I go? No. I leave Redways to-morrow—for good."

She missed the faint mocking accent on the last word. "Shan't I see you again, then, after to-night?" she asked a little tremulously.

"Oh, yes, I hope so." His note of cheerfulness was too obviously forced. "There is still to-morrow, Lady Fibbets. There is always to-morrow."

To-morrow! Poor consolation to speak to young hearts of to-morrow. What consolation was that to a heart weighed down by the thought of many to-morrows to be spent alone?

She tried to speak calmly. "Why are you going suddenly, like this?"

She managed the question quite steadily, her clear eyes on his face. Again, he did not reply directly.

"I can only say again that it's more a question of why I ever came back." He looked away from her now. "As I was supposed to be dead, it would have been better if I had remained so. We cannot retrace our steps with

impunity in this world. I do not fit into things here. You yourself must see that. I'm the family skeleton, Kathleen, exposed to the gaze of the curious."

"That is not the reason why you are going away," she said, with a flash of English common sense.

"It has a great deal to do with it, I assure you," was his reply. "Believe me, I have been thinking deeply for some days past. Can't you see that there is no place for me here? I'm like a zebra in an English field—a strange beast stared and snorted at by the other animals. I'm worse than useless in such a setting, so I'm going back."

"I do not see that you were much more useful on your island." She spoke these words with a touch of petulance which she instantly regretted.

He met this with a strange smile. "I'm of no use anywhere, not the slightest. But I'm going to try and do something useful—as the world reckons usefulness—before I go back to my island. I'm to be a hardy pioneer of Empire first—imagine it! There's a mine in New Guinea to be exploited, and I'm to lead an expedition to the spot, at my father's request. We shall take out mining rights, develop the field, and all that sort of thing, in the name of Britain and freedom."

"I should have thought that Sir Roger had enough money of his own already," she said scornfully.

"Few men ever admit they have enough of that commodity," he said. "This expedition is no mere vulgar exploitation for wealth—do not imagine so. There's a patriotic side to the venture. The idea is to conserve the mineral resources of the Empire. Just think what it would mean if some wretched foreigner was to stumble across my mine!"

She was piqued more by his light tone than his pretended cynicism. Moreover, some instinct warned her

that he was not telling her everything. She guessed at once that this proposed expedition, which sounded to her ears like some legendary adventure of the days of the Conquistadores, covered a deeper reason for his sudden departure—a reason which he carefully guarded, and did not intend to divulge to her. That thought hurt and chilled her, and held her silent.

He seemed to read her thought, and spoke in a different voice:

“Do not think of me as a money-grubber, Lady Fibbets. I want nothing, except to forget.”

“Forget what?” She spoke quickly.

“Forget that I ever returned to life.”

“There are others who cannot forget so readily,” she reminded him in a low tone, though that was an answer which might have betrayed her.

His bitterness dropped from him, and his eyes pleaded for understanding.

“Lady Fibbets, Lady Fibbets—believe me, it is better so.” He checked himself sharply, and went on rather lamely. “I shall see you in the morning, before I go.”

“Yes; there is always to-morrow.” She could not resist the opening to give him back his own words as a gibe. She was like a wounded creature, in the mood to hurt him, as he had hurt her. Ah, why, after all, had he come back, only to make her unhappy before vanishing again like some perturbed spirit or uneasy wraith? He was like no other man that ever lived—in his contempt for life, for its observances and its conventions. There was something in this latest move of his which disconcerted her exceedingly, like a mocking laugh. Yet his eyes were gentle enough now, as he looked at her.

“Yes; there is always to-morrow, Lady Fibbets.”

He caught one of her listless hands in his, and walked

quickly away, leaving her looking after him, with heaving breast.

The memory of their talk remained with her, then and afterward—after dinner, in her room, where she went to think it all over. That interview was beyond her comprehension: his attitude puzzled her. Why could he not stay in England and be happy, or try to be happy? Was he one doomed to be driven all over the world by the force of his own restless spirit, urged hither and thither by some force which he could not control, by a wandering disposition which counted as nothing such dear English words as home, happiness and love? It seemed so, yet why? She had the feeling that his smiling indifferent eyes concealed a state of mind perilously akin to despair, but she could not pierce the reason. All his actions were wrapped in a haze of reticence and mystery.

He was going away. That fact emerged plainly enough: here was reality.

Her eyes fell upon the gilt lettering of a small book he had given her years ago; a volume of verse she had cherished through his long absence. She opened it now, and read the inscription in faded ink: "To Lady Fibbets, with Robert's love."

It was Edward Fitzgerald's translation of Omar Khayyám—hardly a suitable present for a girl of nine, but that was also like Robert Lynngarth. She turned the pages listlessly. Like many sweet and lovable English girls, Kathleen had small taste in poetry, and the old Tentmaker's philosophy of barren longing expressed a futility which seemed almost wicked to her clear practical sense. But that night it appealed to some hitherto unsuspected side of her temperament. She read on until she reached the verse:

“Ah, my Beloved, fill the Cup that clears
To-day of past Regrets, and future Fears.
To-morrow? Why, To-morrow I may be
Myself with Yesterday's Sev'n Thousand Years.”

She pushed the book away from her. Robert was going to-morrow, and then he, too, would belong to the past as far as she was concerned. She felt she would never see him again.

She could not bear that thought. It filled her with sorrow.

From her window her eyes rested on the garden, peaceful in the ebbing twilight. It seemed to beckon to her to share its tranquillity. She left her room and went down.

It was cool and pleasant there. She walked until the last gleam of daylight faded and night descended like the gentle fall of a black curtain. Darkness took possession of the woods and garden, and light gleamed from the closed windows of the house. Kathleen's unrest was succeeded by a feeling of peace.

A sound broke the scented stillness of the garden like some unseen bird singing in the dusk. The notes floated through the night in liquid cadence, sweet and piercing. It was easy to imagine some strange foreign songster of glittering plumage pouring out melody from the thickness of the ivy where homelier English birds were now twittering themselves to sleep, if the notes had not shaped themselves into words of the Italian tongue. Kathleen knew that the music was coming from nothing more romantic than the new gramophone, a perfect instrument of its kind, which had been sent down from London for Stella. The glorious voice reached her ears

without any suggestion of the means which made the dead tenor sing again. The words came to her clearly:

“La donna è mobile,
Qual pluma al vento,
Muta d’accento
E di pensiero . . .”

She went over to the window to hear the music better. The interior of the room was on a level with the front terrace, and Kathleen, standing on the lawn, could see into the interior above her as the curtains of the partly-open windows swayed gently in the night air. Stella and Robert were alone in the room, standing by the gramophone, talking earnestly.

The air from *Rigoletto* covered their conversation, which was evidently of absorbing interest to both. Kathleen gathered that from their intent and serious faces. She made no stir, but stood there, watching them. Stella was close to Robert, looking into his face, and speaking in a quick low voice. Kathleen was fascinated by her uplifted gaze, which was subtle, baffling, yet intensely feminine. The expression of her golden-brown eyes, as they rested upon her companion, vaguely troubled the unsuspected beholder of it on the lawn outside. Robert was not looking at Stella. His eyes were fixed upon the carpet at his feet.

Stella seemed to be urging something upon him to which he was reluctant to agree; so Kathleen judged from his attitude, which appeared to her grave and a little embarrassed. Kathleen was aware that she ought not to be standing there looking in at them, but she could not tear herself away. She found herself wondering what the conversation was about. What had they to talk over at

such length, these two? As she thought this she saw Stella move closer to Robert and impulsively take his hand within her own.

Kathleen fell back a little, startled and shocked, but her eyes remained fixed upon the two unconscious figures within the drawing-room. At that moment the sound of the gramophone suddenly ceased, and two words from Stella's lips reached her out on the lawn.

"To-night, then."

"You are mad to think of it," Robert answered.

"To-night. I am reckless."

"You are very foolish."

"To-night."

"It is madness on your part."

"I don't care. I tell you——"

"Hush!" Kathleen saw Robert give an apprehensive glance round him. "You may be overheard."

"I don't care for anything now that you are going away."

Passion ran like an undercurrent in her subdued tones. Then her sweet voice abruptly ceased, and she moved a little away from him, but still kept her eyes upon his face.

CHAPTER XV

IN THE NIGHT

KATHLEEN shrank back into the shadow of the garden, motionless, petrified. She stood passive in an imperturbable calm of despair, watching them. Stella still faced Robert with eyes in which blazed unfathomable things. Kathleen saw her touch his hand again with eager fingers, and press a note into it. His own fingers closed quickly over the morsel of paper, but his guarded face gave no indication of his thoughts.

The familiar objects of the room stood in their places unmoved; the portraits on the wall witnessed this piece of folly in discreet silence.

Some one entered the room—Lady Mercer. Kathleen heard her silk skirts rustle as she bore down upon those two in the corner; caught the pitch of her sharp voice. “A gramophone? A monstrous invention—enough to make all the Lynngarths turn in their graves if they could see it at Redways! Grinds out the same tune over and over again, like your modern statesmen. But we have to endure such things nowadays, whether we like them or not.” And Stella’s cold rejoinder: “Shall I stop it?” followed by Lady Mercer’s reply: “Not on my account. Put on that record I heard from my room. Caruso, wasn’t it? Ah, his was a real voice. I heard him at Covent Garden before the Americans bought his soul with their dollars. ‘La donna è mobile,’ wasn’t it? So they are—all women. Fickle as cats.”

Kathleen could see their faces clearly enough. Stella’s,

cold, beautiful, composed, bending over the cabinet of records; Lady Mercer looking on; Robert standing a little apart.

Kathleen made her way back through the garden and upstairs to her room, a feeling of unutterable weariness weighing down her limbs as she mounted the stairs. When she reached the haven of her room she locked the door behind her, though she did not know why. No one was likely to disturb her there. She was alone with her thoughts.

Instinctively she switched on the light, but shrank appalled as she caught a glimpse of her features in the mirror. Her face was white, and there was something lurking in the depths of her eyes which she had never seen before: a wild look which returned her own as if some secret separate consciousness mocked at her discovery and rejoiced at the shattering of her inmost dreams. This secret look from her inner self shocked and frightened her. She turned away quickly and switched off the light again.

She stood in the darkness, thinking. The scent of the late summer night reached her through the open window: the faint sweetness of meadows and hayfields, spiced with the richer perfume of clove pinks and roses in the old garden. The wind murmured in the woods, and the river sang its quiet song to the reeds. It was her first experience of nature's indifference to the miseries and passions which vex humanity. There was something in the profound and scented stillness which jarred and hurt her.

Her mind pondered over the episode in the drawing-room, and its meaning. They had met before, these two; met somewhere in the mysterious wild spaces of the world where Robert had spent twelve long years. Why had they kept this to themselves when they met again, to

whisper and exchange notes when they were alone? The knowledge of their secret oppressed her, but it was Robert's treachery to herself which hurt her most. She told herself it was her first glimpse of the manner in which her sex were deceived by men. Deceived? Girls were self-deceived. Why she—even she . . .

In the darkness she flushed scarlet at her safely hidden thought. With a sudden change of mood, she switched on the light again.

It blazed on her pale face, her tumbled hair, and heavy eyes. The mirror reflected a slight girlish figure, dark hair falling on neck, trembling lips, and a wistful, frightened gaze. She herself was not conscious of anything immature or childlike in her reflection. She felt old, immeasurably old, with the knowledge of human things.

She sat quite still, thinking.

Time ebbed rapidly, imperceptibly. Her usual hour for retiring came and passed, but she was not aware of it. Familiar sounds of the household preparing for bed floated up, but she did not heed them. A little later footsteps paused in the corridor outside her door, and a light knock aroused her. She heard Lady Mercer's voice.

"Are you in bed, Kathleen?"

"Yes," she replied, and was thankful that the door was locked.

"Then good night, dear. Have a good night's rest."

A good night, with one word burning in her brain? She felt she should never know another good night; as if that single word of Stella's, with its implications, had banished sleep from her eyes for ever.

"To-night . . ."

A small object on her dressing-table attracted her

wandering glance. It was the velvet-bound volume of Omar which Robert had given her so many years before. It lay open at the page where she had been reading:

“TO-MORROW? Why, To-morrow I may be
Myself with Yesterday’s Sev’n Thousand Years.”

She shut the little book sharply. No more—she could not read his gift now. Misery and anger filled her heart. To-morrow? What, indeed, had she to do with to-morrow? There might be to-morrows for Stella, a future when she would meet Robert again, touch his hand, whisper secret things to him. But for herself——

“Kathleen . . . Lady Fibbets . . .”

She started as at the sound of a real voice, looking round her in the empty stillness of the room. Then she buried her face in her hands as if to shut out a vision, and tears flowed fast through her fingers.

There was a sound of shutting doors downstairs, then silence and a creak or two, as if the old house was stretching itself before sinking into slumber for the night. Kathleen glanced at the watch on her wrist. Eleven o’clock! It was time she put out the light.

She turned it off, but did not undress. Hands clasped, she sat on in the darkness, immersed in her sad thoughts.

Another hour passed, and the clock in the hall downstairs proclaimed the time of midnight. Timepieces in different rooms took up the count. Kathleen had no idea there were so many clocks in the house. In the profound stillness they seemed to go on striking twelve over and over again. They died away at last. No—not all. One clock upstairs seemed to have waited for silence in order to have the last word. Twelve silver chimes from it rang shivering through the darkness of the corridor outside—quite close at hand. How was it

that the faint mellifluous notes reached her ears so clearly? Had some one opened a door in the corridor, letting out the sound? That thought brought her noiselessly to her feet and silently to her own door. She opened it gently—an inch or so—and peered cautiously through the chink. Her ear was caught by a slight creak.

Something was coming along the corridor: a dim shape without a light. It passed her door swiftly and lightly as a ghost. It was no ghost, but a creature of flesh and blood: a woman. Kathleen knew who it was.

Her eyes followed the figure, and lost it in the gloom. She opened her door a little wider, searching the blackness of the passage. As she gazed a tongue of light darted out in the depth of the opposite corridor. A door had been opened: the door of Robert Lynngarth's room. Then darkness again.

As she stood thus she saw light again, but this time in the darkness below. It filled the hall, flickered on the polished staircase, and cast uneasy shapes on the ceiling of the corridor. The electric light had been turned on downstairs. Her eyes sought the great shadowy staircase in suspense and fear. A figure was mounting it slowly. Each step brought it higher until the face came into view. It was Sir Roger Lynngarth, fully dressed, as she had last seen him at the dinner-table.

Breathlessly she watched his black-garbed figure ascending the gleaming stairs. He paused several times, as though weary. His face was white and tense, like a man suffering or in mental disquietude. Leisurely he made his deliberate way upwards until he reached the landing on the first floor. He paused again to turn on the cluster of lights held aloft there, and went into the long corridor on his right hand.

The house preserved the decorous silence of age, indifferent to all things. Kathleen felt that the walls should have cried aloud and warned him. Her own terrified lips unconsciously framed the single word "Stop!" She strove to utter it, but no sound issued from her mouth. Sir Roger reached his son's door, and knocked. Kathleen could see the raised hand with a ring upon the little finger. She shook a little in her own concealment, as at the spectacle of a hand knocking at a burial vault, seeking to pry into things best left covered and unknown.

Terror seized her then—terror swift and unreasoning. In a panic she shut her door sharply, heedless whether she was heard or not. With a wildly beating heart she flung herself downward on her bed, pressing her face on the pillow in an effort to shut out the memory of the scene.

CHAPTER XVI

A VEILED DISAPPEARANCE

SHE awoke from a long dreamless sleep, and sat up, looking around her at the familiar objects of her room. The sun had already topped the tall elms outside her window, and she stared at the play of the slanting beams on the carpet, drowsily, wonderingly, like a kitten blinking at the light. Then suddenly it all came back to her—those overnight events which had brought her world of dreams crashing in ruins never to be rebuilt. Never again. The girl of yesterday was dead, and all she believed in had died with her. Everything! There was nothing left.

She sat still, her little wistful face propped on a slender hand, thinking it all out. Her dark hair hung loosely about her face, and she pushed it back with the weary gesture of a young creature numbed by the first shattering revelation of the strangeness of the human heart. "If . . ." Her lips wistfully uttered the words, placing that pathetically human offering at the feet of the unknown gods. "If there is only some other explanation." She could find none.

At last she sprang up, dismayed at the lateness of the hour, dreading the ordeal which awaited her downstairs. She would have to sit through the morning meal as if she knew nothing, suspected nothing.

A knock at the door interrupted her. "May I come in, Kathleen?" said a familiar voice, and without waiting for permission the handle was turned and Lady Mercer walked in.

The girl turned and faced her. Instinctively she realized that this visit had some special significance. Something of importance must have happened to draw Lady Mercer from her room at the breakfast hour. Had Sir Roger told her anything? She dismissed the thought. That would not have brought Lady Mercer to her room before breakfast. Lady Mercer had old-fashioned ideas of what young girls ought to know.

Lady Mercer closed the door carefully behind her, and came to her side with a grave and anxious look.

"Kathleen, dear," she said, "something strange happened in the house last night."

Kathleen gave her a startled glance, but did not speak.

Lady Mercer hesitated, then laid a hand upon her arm.

"You must be told," she said. "The fewer words the better. Sir Roger cannot be found. He is missing."

"Oh!" cried Kathleen.

"Ashdown made the discovery this morning when he went to call him," Lady Mercer continued. "He had told Ashdown the night before that he was sleeping in the oak bedroom downstairs, as he occasionally does, but Ashdown found the room empty this morning, and it did not appear to have been occupied. Ashdown rushed upstairs to Stella's room, but she had not seen him. Mr. Stonnard sent my maid to tell me, and there's been a hurried and fruitless search of the house. It's a most extraordinary thing, and I'm very perplexed and alarmed. Roger went to the Painted Room after dinner last night to write some letters. Jauncey took him coffee there, and he's not been seen since. Stonnard suggests he may have been called away by telephone, but if Roger had been summoned away on some tiresome political business he would have, at least, let the household know. He's

the last man in the world to do anything eccentric. He seems to have simply vanished, without anyone seeing him go. That's why I've come to you, Kathleen. You retired very early last night. Were you out of your room afterwards, and did you see anything of Sir Roger?"

"No."

The denial, clear and distinct, was forced from Kathleen's lips by some volition other than her own—by some secret instinct she dared not try to fathom. It was as though she merely obeyed some power within her, stronger than herself, which dictated her answer and left her to take whatever consequences might befall.

Lady Mercer looked disappointed.

"You saw nothing of Sir Roger—of anyone—after you came upstairs?"

"No; I didn't."

Again she was conscious that the reply was not hers, but was framed on her lips, with the calm assurance of deliberate thought, by the same compelling force which had led her to utter the previous untruth. But this time the veil was drawn: she knew what controlled her. Love had spoken within her, and love cares nothing for truth. She knew that nothing counted for her now except to shield Robert from the consequence of his own acts, whatever they might be. He was unworthy, but love cared nothing for unworthiness, either. Love was sacrifice—sacrifice of one's self. For him! There could never be anything between them, but she would always love him. The years would pass, and her misery with it, but the memory of her effort to save him would remain. She was glad that the courage had been given to her. . . . She looked at Lady Mercer with luminous eyes, their soft light full of the glory of love, the splendour of sacrifice, the illusion of youth.

But Lady Mercer was old, and did not see these things.

"Then there is nobody else to ask," she said. "I thought perhaps——" She did not say what she thought, but went on in different strain: "One or two disturbing things have happened in this house during the last few days. I have my eyes yet. However, I didn't come here to talk to you about that, my dear. I do hope that nothing has happened to poor Roger. Perhaps I'm alarming myself unnecessarily. We must keep up our courage and hope for the best. Come, dear, let us go down to breakfast. People must eat, though the heavens fall. Afterwards——"

They went downstairs together. Kathleen knew not to what, but she felt better able to support the coming ordeal in the company of Lady Mercer, whose own dominant personality needed little support from the carved balustrade of nymphs and satyrs on which her white beringed hand rested so lightly. There was no woodland brake where Kathleen could flee for shelter, and so she shrank closer to Lady Mercer. The grim and beaked great lady patted her hand gently, as though she understood.

The morning meal was served in a small panelled apartment off the great hall—"an unspoiled interior" the missing owner of Redways was wont to describe it, meaning by that an early Tudor interior unmarred by later efforts of restoration. It was a dark and gloomy room, but the panels were in perfect preservation, and the beams wonderfully carved.

Here Robert and Stella awaited them. Mr. Stonnard was there also.

Kathleen's first quick glance at Lady Lynngarth told her nothing, if indeed she had expected to learn anything in that quarter. Stella's beautiful face was sorrowful and

anxious. Her bewilderment at the strange event seemed real enough. Her admirable demeanour might have inspired an ambitious young painter with Academy yearnings for a "Picture of a Sorrowful Lady" or something of that sort. Her loveliness was undimmed, and the little sunshine able to penetrate into the "unspoiled interior" seemed to be glimmering in her fair hair. There was no trace in her of last night's clandestine figure, nor any symptom of fear or shame. In her grief she looked sincere. She had qualities—Kathleen admitted it—moral courage at least. But it was easy for her, Kathleen thought indignantly, because she believed that her secret was quite safe. She little guessed that she could have put her composure to flight with a single word.

Robert's behaviour was not so admirable. The masculine mask of concealment was more clumsily adjusted. It was plain to Kathleen that he was uneasy as well as deeply moved. His face was worn, and slight movements of his hands suggested mental tension. As Kathleen entered he looked at her with a quick scrutiny which caused her to veil her own eyes for fear he might read something there. But she felt that he still watched her.

The greetings were brief, and then Lady Mercer summoned the butler.

"Jauncey!" she said.

The trusted functionary was at the post of duty. A tremendous upheaval had swept into his calm orbit, but he met it unmoved. A butler cannot afford the luxury of emotion with a morning meal on his hands. He was also full of household cares. At that moment his eye dwelt absently upon a new maid in attendance: a bright-eyed slip of a girl with a weak mouth, whom Jauncey suspected of flightiness. And two of his spoons were missing in last night's count—the small crested teaspoons,

priceless, irreplaceable. Such things required an undivided attention from the guardian of servants' morals and family plate. For these reasons Jauncey's manner showed a trace of preoccupation in his reply.

"Yes, madam?"

"We will search the house again before breakfast."

The butler bowed, and went to the door and opened it. The house had already been searched from top to bottom, but it was not for him to remind the great lady of that—and, indeed, she knew it already. So he held the door open until Lady Mercer and the young people passed through, and then followed with noiseless step in their wake.

"The Painted Room first, Jauncey," said Lady Mercer, as they stood in a group in the hall.

Jauncey bowed again, and this time preceded the little party down the corridor off the hall, a high passage where dead-and-gone Lynngarths looked down on the procession from massive gilt frames. In this manner they proceeded to the Painted Room. Jauncey laid a hand on the door to open it, but recoiled with a frightened face.

"It is locked," he cried.

"Then you'd better bring the key," said Lady Mercer.

"The key's inside the door," returned the butler, shrinking back.

Stonnard stepped forward and tried the handle. "Locked, sure enough," he said. "What's the meaning of this? It was open this morning—you remember, Lynngarth?" Robert nodded, and the secretary turned sharply upon the butler. "You must have locked this door yourself after Mr. Lynngarth and I searched the room."

"No, sir," said the butler, "I did not."

"Some one has," persisted Stonnard. "Come, try and think."

"It wasn't me," cried the butler. "I thought of doing so, then I knew that if Sir Roger returned he would not like to find the door of his study locked without his permission. So I let it be."

"Then one of the servants has locked up the room," said Lady Mercer. "Doors of empty rooms don't lock themselves."

"With all deference to your ladyship, they would not dare. Not without my permission." The functionary was merged into the man, and a very pale and nervous one at that.

"If you say that, we must break in," said Stonnard. He bent down, then straightened himself. "Jauncey is right. The key is inside the door. At least, I cannot see through the keyhole."

"Then the door was locked by no mortal hand," cried Jauncey, with ashen face. "God help us, terrible things are happening in this house. What are we to do?"

At this unexpected outcry Stella's nerves gave way. She uttered a startled exclamation, and swayed a little. Robert looked at her for a moment, and then turned to Stonnard.

"There's no need to break down the door," he said in an undertone. "The Painted Room looks out on the lawn. We can get in through the window."

The young man nodded. "I never thought of that," he said. "We will go, shall we—you and I?"

But Robert was already down the corridor, and the secretary followed in the wake of his tall figure, leaving the three ladies grouped tremulously around the door, and the white-faced butler in the background.

Outside a touch of autumn chill was in the air. The

wind sighed with a dreary foretaste of winter, stirring the sere leaves which lay thick in the old garden. In silence the two men traversed the paths until they reached the lawn outside the Painted Room. One half of the long narrow French window was unfastened, flapping to and fro in the wind. The sound caused Stonnard to look quickly up and point out the open window to his companion.

"Was the window unfastened when we were in the room, this morning?" he asked.

"I don't remember," the other rejoined. He moved across the lawn and flung the window wide. "I see nothing," he said.

He stepped through, and Stonnard after. The empty room was as they had seen it earlier, in neatness and order. There was the open bureau, papers showing, and a drawer pulled out; a bowl of flowers and a book or two on the table, chairs sedately in place: a quiet writing-room, with the morning light falling softly on Stella's picture in its silver frame, and glinting the gloomy landscape above the mantelpiece, where the Eye looked down disapprovingly. But there was no trace of Sir Roger Lynngarth, alive or dead. Stonnard fancied that the order of the papers on the bureau had been disturbed since he saw them before, but he could not be sure.

"Nothing here," said Robert, looking around him.

"The bedroom," murmured his companion, unconsciously lowering his voice.

The door of the inner room was closed, but not shut. Robert crossed the Painted Room and thrust it open. A glance showed it was empty, and the bed undisturbed. This room was also as they had seen it before, but Robert thoroughly examined it. Stonnard watched him from the open door. When further search was useless, they

returned to the other room. Robert nodded in the direction of the outer door.

"The key's in the door," he said.

Stonnard looked at it. "Jauncey was right. There has been some one here, but we've come too late. What does it mean?"

Robert shrugged his shoulders rather wearily, as if he disdained answer to such profitless speculation. Stonnard looked about him.

"There's something terribly wrong, I fear," he sighed. "What do you think has happened, Lynngarth?"

"Who can say—or even guess?" was the quiet reply.

Stonnard nodded seriously, still looking around.

"If this room could tell us!" he said. "I wish now that I'd disregarded his wishes, and looked in on my way upstairs. I saw his light beneath the door, as I've often seen it."

"It was out this morning, his man says."

They looked at each other in silence. There was fear in Stonnard's eyes. The look Robert gave him back showed sadness.

"Now that we have searched, we had better open the door," he said. "The others will be anxious."

He crossed the carpet in a stride and turned the key. The opened door showed four faces which sought his own anxiously. He answered that mute interrogation with a shake of the head, and the three ladies came into the room.

"You have found nothing?" asked Lady Mercer.

"Nothing, except that key inside the door," he returned.

"Then some one has been here," she declared positively. "Who was it?"

"Perhaps Sir Roger," said Stonnard, reassuringly.

Lady Mercer shook her head. "No," she said decisively; "Sir Roger would not act so. Why should he?" Her eye caught Robert's, and she turned on him impetuously. "What do you make of it, Robert—this locked door?"

"I do not think it matters much, at present," he rejoined.

"The thing's to find your father first, you mean? Yes, but what's to be done? Roger was here last night, and now he has gone—disappeared without a sign! Where can he be?"

"He must be somewhere," Stonnard remarked.

"Yes, yes!" Kathleen's fresh young voice caught at this vague hope. "He must be somewhere, as Mr. Stonnard says." Then the strangeness of the mystery of the two empty rooms came home to her more fully, and with a nervous glance at their emptiness she added: "But where?"

"That we must find out," said Lady Mercer. "Pray Heaven there is nothing amiss."

"Ah, do not say that!" These words came in a whisper from Stella's white lips. She looked at Lady Mercer with dilated eyes.

Robert cast a perturbed glance at her which Kathleen saw.

"You are upset, Stella"—Lady Mercer looked at her gently—"you had better come away. And you too, Kathleen."

"I am all right," said Stella restlessly. "Only——" Words faltered on her lips, and she made a gesture of fear.

"Perhaps we are alarming ourselves needlessly," observed Stonnard, trying to speak cheerfully. "Sir Roger may have gone out for an early walk."

"Do you think so"—Stella's face was unreadable—"do you really think that, Mr. Stonnard?"

Stonnard looked uncomfortable. "He may have."

Lady Mercer, regarding Stella, answered this. "No," she said sharply. "That untouched bed in the next room does not look like an early morning walk. Besides, Roger would not have gone off like this without leaving word. He would never have scared us with such a stupid freak—I know him far too well to suppose it. There's some other reason for his absence."

"Some terrible reason." These words came impetuously from the pretty lips of Kathleen like a flash of steel—a challenge, as it were, to the man at whom she was looking. "He must be alive, but I fear—I fear——" She could not say any more.

The answering glance which Robert gave her was a strange one. "What do you fear?" he asked.

She shook her head. That was a problem she was not competent to answer unaided. Lady Mercer looked from one to the other.

"Child," she said, "leave this to me. No; not to me, for it is beyond me and beyond us all, so we must hand over this terrible mystery to some one better able to investigate it for us." She went to the telephone on the bureau. "I shall telephone for Colonel Glenluce," she said.

"Would it not be better to wait a little longer?" suggested Robert.

"Wait? For what?" Lady Mercer, turning over the pages of the telephone book, glanced up impatiently. "We must delay no longer. That would only make matters worse."

The next moment she spoke in a loud voice into the instrument, asking for a trunk call to London.

CHAPTER XVII

COLONEL GLENLUCE ARRIVES

SHE was awaiting him, full of impatience, when he reached Redways in the afternoon.

"At last!" she said, as she gave him her hand.

"My dear Lady Mercer!"—his tone was expostulatory—"I left everything and came at once."

"I know, I know. It is good of you. Forgive me, Colonel Glenluce. The time has seemed long. This strange disappearance of my brother-in-law——"

"Tell me all about it, Lady Mercer."

She told him everything in lowered voice. For that precaution there seemed little need. Their interview took place in the secluded Painted Room, and they were alone, unless the Eye over the mantelpiece could be considered a listener. Even so, its discretion could be relied upon. Lady Mercer's low rapid tone strained the attention of her hearer. He listened full of concern, his hopes of some simple explanation vanishing as she talked.

"Oh, this seems impossible!" he exclaimed when she had finished. "A man like Sir Roger cannot disappear in this fashion from his own house."

"Nevertheless, it has happened," she said.

"Without a suggestion, not the merest hint, that he intended to go away?"

She shook her head. "Should I have sent for you in that case?"

"Then he must be found."

"Do you think any harm has befallen him?"

He looked grave. "I trust not."

"Colonel Glenluce"—she spoke with deliberation—"do not think that because I am a woman I am also a fool. Why should Roger leave home in this stealthy manner, leaving us all a prey to suspense and anxiety?"

He could think of no convincing answer. "It is undoubtedly strange. Still, he may have had some imperative reason—some urgent call."

"Come, Colonel Glenluce, do not try to hoodwink me." She looked at him keenly. "Let us face the facts. Roger cannot have vanished into thin air. And there is no reason, no conceivable reason, why he should have gone off in this way. I fear——"

She paused.

"What do you fear?" he asked.

She made an expressive gesture. "Everything."

He endeavoured to speak cheerfully. "Let us not be pessimistic. Some news may come at any moment. If Sir Roger does not return, we may hear from him."

"Unless he is dead."

"Oh, do not give way to such gloomy thoughts," he counselled again. "They can do no good, in any case. Meanwhile, leave everything in my hands. I will do all that is possible—all that can be done."

"It is a great relief to have you here," she murmured.

He deprecated that. "Myself—I do not count. But I have resources, if necessary, at my command," he hinted.

She bowed her head in acknowledgment of the forces of authority at the beck of his official position. The reflection seemed to give her strength. She even smiled a little.

"Very well. I will leave everything in your hands,

and hope for the best. Here are Roger's keys. Mr. Stonnard found them on the bureau this morning when the house was being searched. You will do just as you think fit."

She hesitated, and he saw that she had something more to tell him—something on her mind. He remained quiet, waiting. After a while she lifted her head, and, glancing towards the closed door, said a little wearily:

"Colonel Glenluce, strange things have been happening in this house."

Again he kept silence, waiting for her to continue. But her next words surprised him:

"Things have been different since Robert came back."

"In what way?" he asked, with a swift realization that some strange disclosure was to come.

"Ever since his return there has been some mystery in the house." Her reply was tinged with hesitation, nervousness even. "I have my own thoughts, but I've kept them to myself so far. But last night, in the drawing-room, I noticed something which made things a little clearer to my own mind. There seems to me to be some understanding between Robert and his father's wife."

Glenluce looked his wonderment. "What kind of an understanding?"

"I think that they are attracted to each other. Wait!" she continued, holding up her hand. "I must tell you everything that is in my mind. It is right that you should know. I feel sure that Stella is infatuated with Robert, which comes to the same thing."

"She is his father's wife," he began.

"Ah, you do not know Robert as I do. He does not look at life like other men. Many people are cynical and reckless in thought, but not in action. Robert is. He has the courage of his convictions. The things which

count for us do not count with him. He believes in nothing, and acts accordingly. I do not understand Stella so well, but she is weak, and when a beautiful woman is weak tragedy follows her very closely. . It is an easy matter for a woman like Stella to wreck her life, given the circumstances. I believe that they have arisen with Robert's return. Her eyes follow him unconsciously and soften when they dwell upon him. I have watched her. Besides——”

She came to an abrupt stop, as if even her own worldliness was startled by the implications of her suggestion.

The implication was clear enough to Glenlúce, but he did not believe it. He had an innate distrust of all feminine disclosures in such matters, believing that sex was the monomania of women. Besides, he did not see where this particular disclosure was taking them. Was his companion inferring that Sir Roger's wife and son had anything to do with his disappearance? He essayed a platitude to conceal his thoughts.

“There is such a thing as a moral law which every man recognizes in his heart. No man is wholly bad.”

“I never suggested that Robert was bad,” she retorted impatiently. “He's merely reckless, which is quite a different thing. He cares nothing for conventional morality; at least, not for that form of it which allots one woman to one man; though, Heaven knows, that division of the sexes exists only in theory to-day. It is curious how that type of man can always carry a woman off her feet. Robert is very fascinating, though. He has a way with him, when he chooses.”

“Do you know the reason which took him out of England twelve years ago, and whether it still exists?”

“I know nothing about that except that they quar-

relled." She looked at him. "I thought Roger had confided the story to you."

"He wished to, but I declined to hear it. That was on the day of Robert's return."

"This room knows the reason." She surveyed the allegorical panels. "It was in here that they had their last interview. When it was over Robert bounced out of the house and out of England. His mother died without knowing the truth of the matter. Roger never told her. Even on her death-bed he refused. It must have been something serious to keep Robert away from home so long."

He nodded gravely, and then reverted to her suspicions. "Well, Lady Mercer, as to the other thing you've mentioned, if you are correct—and I hope that you're not—I do not see how it could throw any light on Sir Roger's absence."

"It might suggest a reason for his disappearance."

He was shocked at this hint, and cast an apprehensive glance around him.

"That is rather a reckless thing to say, Lady Mercer," he said, with an air of grave rebuke.

She accepted the reproach with perfect composure. "I may be wrong of course. But Roger has disappeared, and cannot be found. I have asked for your help, so I thought it better to tell you this." And at that she rose to go.

He rose also. "One word more. Does anyone know of this suspicion of yours besides myself?"

She returned his glance with wise eyes. "No, I have not been so foolish as that, and I sincerely hope that I am wrong." She gave him a wan glance, and left the room.

She would have been surprised to know how little her

disclosure affected him. It was not that he deemed it impossible. But some profound instinct, as he believed, told him that it was a complete lie as far as Robert Lynn-garth was concerned. He put Lady Mercer's story out of his mind, or tried to, for the present at least, and applied himself to the task of solving the mystery of his old friend's disappearance.

By evening he had reached the conclusion that the mystery was beyond his unaided powers. He wished now that he had brought down a couple of good men from London. Glenluce had too much English common sense to suppose that the accident of political influence which had given him a high position in the Home Office had made a detective of him at the same time. He had no quarrel with the political system which placed square pegs like himself in round holes. It was a system which worked well enough in the main, and, after all, it suited England. Only, it was not quite the post he would have chosen for himself, if he had had any voice in the matter.

At Redways that day he had already done more peeping and prying than he cared for. He had searched the house and examined the servants without result. He had learnt that Sir Roger had gone to his study on the previous night shortly after dinner, and had been served there with coffee by the butler, who had been told by Sir Roger that he was busy writing letters and did not wish to be disturbed again that night. No one else had seen him after, though the light was observed beneath the door of the Painted Room when the household retired to bed. There was nothing strange in that; the master of the house sometimes sat up late reading and writing, and on these occasions slept in the Oak Bedroom adjoining his study. Such was the scanty history of Sir Roger's movements on the previous night, from which nothing more

was to be gleaned than the fact that he had disappeared as completely as if spirited away by a genie on a magic carpet.

These inquiries occupied Glenluce's day, and it was nearly dinner-time before he reached the conclusion mentioned. To be exact, it was between the sounding of the dressing gong and the moment of that meal. Dressed for it, Glenluce walked in the garden smoking a cigar, and thinking about Sir Roger's mysterious absence. He was unable to see a ray of light anywhere. From the garden he walked across to a high antique wall which had been built on that side of the house as a protection from the bitter winds which swept across the river flats from that quarter in the winter. A ledge ran along the inside of this wall, high up, and wide steps mounted to an old garden house of the sixteenth century which had been built on the top. Glenluce ascended to this quaint arbour and walk to enjoy the evening air.

It was a favourite place of his, commanding an extensive vista of the surrounding country and the winding river. Absorbed in his meditations, his eye wandered idly over this familiar scene, then turned nearer home. As he did so, he became aware of two figures standing in a rustic lane between the wood and the river, not far from the house. He had a glimpse of a man with one arm dangling over a crutch, like the drooping pinion of a maimed bird. His companion was a woman.

At the moment he caught sight of them the woman turned away, walking with quick step in the direction of the house. She emerged from a clump of trees, and he recognized the graceful form of Lady Lynngarth, making for a small gate which opened off the garden into the wood on the far side of the house. As she approached, Robert appeared in the garden, and went towards the

gate to which her footsteps were taking her. Stella did not see him until they were almost face to face. She stopped short, made a faltering step forwards, and then, somewhat to the surprise of the observer in the arbour, quickened her pace again and hurried past Robert without a word. Robert stood where he was, looking after her as she entered the garden. His arm swept the air with a strange wild gesture. The next moment he passed through the garden and disappeared in the shadow of the wood.

Pondering over these incidents, Glenluce descended from the wall and turned his steps slowly in the direction of the house.

CHAPTER XVIII

WHAT THE BUREAU REVEALED

DINNER that night was a sombre affair: the presence of a meal presided over by the shadow of an absent figure. The night before the master of the house had sat in his place, safe and honoured; but now his chair was vacant—he had gone without word or sign. This was a thought to repress conversation, for here was a mystery more disquieting than death: something unknown, which had entered and stayed, but remained invisible. What did it mean? What had become of Sir Roger Lynngarth? These were questions which no one could answer.

Glenluce, putting them to himself, glanced more than once towards the head of the table, as if some impalpable visitant there might make a reply. Once he met Robert's eyes, as if the same thought had come to him.

The meal drew to a quick end. When it was over, Stella looked at Lady Mercer, who immediately rose, straight and dignified, and left the room with a ceremonious: "Good night, I think I will go to my room."

Stella and Kathleen followed in her wake, the younger girl pausing near the door to glance towards Colonel Glenluce with a nervous smile, as though she dreaded the ordeal of the night now setting in. Glenluce observed that she had been weeping.

After they had gone the men sat for some minutes without speaking. Glenluce and Stonnard smoked cigarettes from a silver box on the table. Robert filled

a pipe with care, but did not light it. It was he who broke the silence. Turning to Glenluce, he said:

“Have you discovered anything?”

“No, nothing,” was the reply. There was such sadness in the young man’s face that he added: “I am completely nonplussed. It’s a matter beyond me. I thought when Lady Mercer rang me up that she was probably alarming herself unnecessarily, but now I’m sorry that I didn’t bring a good detective with me. I came as your father’s friend. I am not a detective—indeed, I have little capacity for that sort of work.”

He spoke with frankness, because his sympathies had gone out to his friend’s son. He wished sincerely that he could help in some way.

Robert nodded without speaking. It was Stonnard who continued the conversation.

“What are you going to do now?” he asked.

“I will take proper steps.” The voice of Glenluce unconsciously stiffened into official reticence. “Let us trust they will be unnecessary. I still hope that my old friend is quite safe. He might walk in on us at any moment.”

“That is hardly likely, I’m afraid.” The secretary’s eyes bore a puzzled look. “Sir Roger was the most methodical of men.”

“What do you suppose has happened to him?” asked Glenluce abruptly.

“I cannot say—I wish I could form an idea. But I do know that the position admits of no delay.”

“I am aware of that,” replied Glenluce sharply. “I am bringing down two of my best men from Scotland Yard in the morning.”

Stonnard’s nod expressed acquiescence in the wisdom of that action. He went on:

“That is not all. What is to be done if Sir Roger

doesn't return and the mystery of his disappearance remains undiscovered? Several matters have already arisen since last night which press for settlement."

"Let us not suppose the worst—yet," suggested Glenluce gently.

"I said 'if,' " rejoined Stonnard quietly.

"Quite so, but that is supposing the worst. For the present, at least, you should be guided by the advice of Mr. Lynngarth, who in his father's absence takes his place."

"As for that——" Stonnard stopped short.

"What were you going to say?" asked Glenluce in surprise.

The secretary glanced across the table. "Something I had no business to mention," he said slowly.

"Stonnard means I had arranged to leave England in a few days," interposed Robert. "As a matter of fact, I was to have gone to London to-day to complete final preparations for my departure. I was to have sailed next week."

"Sailed—for where?" Glenluce asked.

"To New Guinea in the first place." Robert looked straight into Glenluce's eyes.

"How did this come about?"

"By mutual agreement," responded Robert tranquilly. "It was my father's wish, and I was only too glad to leave England again. That is the short truth of the matter. Of course I shall not go now—until my father's disappearance is accounted for. Stonnard may therefore regard me in my father's place for the time being."

Glenluce looked from one to the other in silence. There was some undercurrent here he did not understand. After a pause Robert rose to his feet and walked deliberately from the room as if to give Stonnard the oppor-

tunity of explaining something which his presence might keep back. Glenluce had no doubt of that.

After he had gone Stonnard began to talk, but not of Robert. He spoke of Sir Roger's disappearance, advancing various speculations and surmises about it. Glenluce now conceived the notion that the secretary talked about the father to forestall any questions he may have wished to ask about Robert's reasons for leaving England again. He had no intention of doing so. It was not in his nature to seek details of what had evidently been a private conversation between father and son.

A sound in the next room broke into their conversation.

"What was that?" exclaimed Stonnard, glancing towards the door.

"Only a window banging, I fancy."

"This thing has upset me." Stonnard glanced at his watch, then rose to his feet. "I think I must ask you to excuse me, Colonel Glenluce. Sir Roger was to have moved the vote of thanks at a meeting in Winchester to-night, so I suppose I had better motor over and apologize for his absence. Shall I explain the reason? It may not be known, as the servants have been warned to say nothing. Still, news of this kind generally spreads quickly. It is a delicate situation, and I should be glad of your advice."

"I should say nothing to-night if nothing has been heard," Glenluce responded. "I still hope there may be some simple natural explanation of Sir Roger's disappearance very soon."

Stonnard nodded with a relieved face.

"Good night, then," he said, and left the room.

Glenluce sat on, contemplative over a solitary cigar. His meditations were undisturbed. The house was quite still and seemed deserted.

His thoughts dwelt first upon the two incidents he had seen from the garden wall before dinner. They struck him as curious, but he did not think they had any bearing upon his old friend's disappearance. What explanation was there of that—what possible interpretation? He racked his brains trying to imagine one. Why should Sir Roger disappear in this strange fashion from his own home, apparently in the middle of the night? He could find no theory.

He rose, cigar in mouth, and went towards the door. The explanation could not be waited for. It must be sought—sought for in the Painted Room, or the bedroom which adjoined it, where the clue to the secret probably lay.

The old house was steeped in silence, and he met no one on his way down the long dim corridor. Taking from his pocket the keys Lady Mercer had given him, he unlocked the door and switched on the light.

The light revealed the outline of familiar things and a glimpse of the empty bedroom through the half-open inner door. The study was orderly and tidy, though bearing signs of recent occupation. The carpet showed marks of footprints, but that was not strange after what had happened. Plainly a number of people had been in and out. The bureau was now locked, but Glenluce had the key. He decided to open the bureau and examine it.

It was a beautiful and antique piece with long lower drawers and an upper writing part containing nests of small drawers and a closed panel in the centre. Glenluce first looked into the pigeon-holes, but could find nothing there except papers and accounts relating to the estate. He searched the neat array of documents methodically, and next turned to the centre panel, which was also locked. Again he found the key to fit it. Within was an aperture

in which lay a large envelope. Glenluce drew it forth, and saw with some surprise that it bore his own name. He opened it with an ivory paper-knife, which he picked up, and two enclosures dropped from the envelope onto the bureau. The smaller envelopes were sealed. One was endorsed "Not to be opened until after my death," and the other bore the words "Open immediately." Glenluce obeyed, and drawing forth a single half-sheet of notepaper, read the few undated lines the letter contained:

"MY DEAR GLENLUCE,

"If anything happens to me, I beg of you, as a friend, to read the second enclosure in the large envelope, and do what you can to help the unhappy being whom it concerns."

The letter was in Sir Roger's formal pinched handwriting, and signed by him. Glenluce carefully examined it, and then picked up the other envelope, with the feeling that the key to the whole mystery probably lay in his hand. He inspected the seal on the second enclosure and scrutinized the superscription, which was unquestionably in Sir Roger Lynngarth's hand, and seemed to have been recently written, for the ink looked fresh. He turned the packet over, glanced at the open letter on the bureau, then looked again at the envelope in his hand. The circumstances were so unusual that he felt tempted to disregard the written injunction and open it to see what light it might throw upon the disappearance of his absent friend. It was for casuists to decide whether the motive justified the deed. Glenluce, no casuist, but an honourable gentleman, hesitated.

As he hesitated he became aware of a moving shadow in the gleaming surface of the mahogany beneath him where the open letter lay. The shadow glided and wav-

ered a little, then became motionless. He was at first puzzled to account for its presence there, but under the sharpened gaze of his arrested attention it took the form of something pale and oval—the faint reflection of a face looking over his shoulder at the letter on the bureau. As he made out this much the shadow vanished and the polished wood became clear again.

Glenluce turned round, but in doing so slipped on the parquet floor. He recovered quickly and looked about. There was nothing to be seen.

The corridor was in darkness. Glenluce struck matches to light him down it, and went to the end. It seemed astir with hidden nocturnal life of its own. Boards creaked and curtains stirred for no apparent reason, but when Glenluce switched on the electric light he could see nothing human there. He examined the curtains and looked into the hall. Nothing.

Slowly he returned, wondering whether anyone had vanished through one of the closed doors of the corridor, but he believed he would have heard or seen the closing door. A thought occurred to him. The bedroom within the Painted Room—Sir Roger's room? That was a possibility he had overlooked. He quickened his steps.

The Painted Room seemed as he had left it, with the door open and the light on. But Glenluce's face changed as he looked towards the bureau. The sealed envelope he had left there was gone.

He made hurried and fruitless search of the bureau, and then looked rapidly about him. He made a thorough examination of the study, and then of the inner bedroom. Both were empty. Returning to the Painted Room, he observed that the window-blind was flapping in the wind. Approaching it, he pulled the blind aside, and saw that the French window was open.

He went out on the lawn. There was an autumn light in the sky, but the night was a dark and gloomy one. Realizing the folly of any search or pursuit, Glenluce stepped back into the Painted Room and closed the window.

But for the disappearance of the letter, he could have almost persuaded himself that the whole inexplicable incident was imagination. But the letter was gone, and the open window bore out the theory that it had been purloined by some thief who had looked over his shoulder and seen it in his hand. He was annoyed at his folly in rushing from the room into the corridor, and thus giving the intruder a clear outlet of escape. A clue of unknown importance had been snatched from his hands—before his eyes, as it were—and he was more than glad now to think that he had sent for two men to come down and investigate the case. He did not know what connection there was (if any) between this theft and Sir Roger Lynngarth's disappearance, but he did know that the mystery was beyond his unaided powers to fathom, and he could make no guess at the meaning of it all. Luckraft was the man for it, and he was glad that he had sent for Luckraft.

He left the study and locked the door behind him. The loss of the letters had impressed him disagreeably, and on reaching the end of the corridor he turned toward the smoking-room with the idea that a cigar before going upstairs would be soothing. He opened the door and glanced in. Robert was sitting there alone, apparently reading, but Glenluce observed that the book was held askew, and the eyes of the reader fixed on the carpet.

He closed the door gently again, and went on his way upstairs.

CHAPTER XIX

THE TOLL OF THE BELL

KATHLEEN knew not what watchful sentinel of subconsciousness beckoned her from sleep, startling her into instant wakefulness, penetrating her with unusual fear. She sat up, breathing fast, looking out from the refuge of the bed. Darkness enveloped her, welled over her head like the waters of a pit. She reached out her hand to the electric button at her bedside, but before she touched the switch it dawned upon her that the light would not come. The lighting in that wing of the house was out of gear—something had gone wrong with the current. She fumbled in the darkness for matches. Her fingers closed over the box, and she lit the candle on the small table beside her.

The candle swelled into a little pool of yellow light, then dwindled to a lambent blue point, as if shrinking from the darkness. That remained impenetrable and mysterious. Kathleen's eyes sought in vain to pierce it. The candle burned more brightly, and she glanced at her wrist-watch. Half-past two! She had been in bed nearly four hours. What had awakened her?

She went to the window, and, opening it wider, looked out. The night, dark, heavy and breathless, yet suggested the coming power of an unrisen moon, which in some intangible way outlined the shape of the trees without revealing them. Not the faintest air stirred in the silent woods. The silence was so absolute that she heard the rustle of a falling leaf.

A faint sound reached her from outside the door; a slight creaking, followed, so it seemed, by the padding of a stealthy foot. She turned, listening intently, but the silence was again complete. Fancy, perhaps; or was it the ghost? She rated herself for her folly. She, who had always laughed at the Redways ghost—at all ghosts. No modern girl believed in such rubbish. Still, that stealthy, creeping sound! But, then, the Redways ghost could not creep. It lacked legs. It was only an eye . . . the malevolent eye of an old monk who had been dispossessed of his grave. The servants believed in it, but servants were credulous, ignorant, superstitious. . . .

She found herself gazing at the candle. The blue inner light within the yellow flame took the semblance of an eye—aged, filmy, blue, regarding her coldly, curiously. She shivered, and closed her own eyes.

No, no, this would never do! She took herself in hand, quickly, determinedly. Opening her eyes to their fullest extent, she stared at the flame with a contemptuous smile. As if conscious of her incredulity, it flickered and flared up angrily, no longer an eye, but unmistakably a candle.

She was pleased with her little triumph of common sense, and smiled to herself, though a little tremulously. Nerves, she told herself; just nerves—the upsetting events of the last twenty-four hours. The turmoil of her feelings had shaken her. She must be calm and quiet, and go to sleep again.

But the thought of sleep repelled her. She was too wakeful, too restless. Wrapping a dressing-gown about her, she sat by the window, looking out.

Her mind dwelt upon Sir Roger's disappearance with an intensity which, it seemed to her, might have been the cause of her sudden awakening. That vanishment

was the culmination of a mysterious sequence of events which had overturned the serenity of her life and destroyed her happiness. Perhaps her inner consciousness, brooding on these things while she slept in the effort to find their solution, had caused her to awake. But she also had the feeling that the awakening was, in some sense, the result of some inward warning. If so, what did it portend? That she could not guess. The thoughts which thronged her brain were too tumultuous for analysis.

The velvety softness of the night gradually calmed her hot brain like the gentle pressure of a cool tender hand. The rising moon slowly cleared the trees, touching the river into quicksilver, filtering a chequer-board of light and shade through the trees of the little wood, making bright paths down the green slope at the side of the house, revealing in dark outline the ruined abbey on the crest of the slope.

Her eyes rested on the old abbey tower in its tangled setting at the edge of the wood. She loved it for many reasons, this harbourage of the forgotten dead. Her glance, dwelling on it now in that wonderful harmony of shadow and brightness, seemed to see it softened, enlarged, complete, as it had once stood complete, a thing of pure beauty against the dark sky.

That, indeed, was imagination, though she was not conscious of the effort which produced the vision. Real enough it seemed, and not the essence of a dream. It grew, though not the work of incarnate hands, taking on added beauty in the darkness. It grew as she watched; arched windows made magic appearance in the deep setting of riven grey stones. It grew, in symmetry, shape, completeness, until the airy fabric of the faultless abbey appeared as it had stood before the coming of the English

Terror. It gleamed with long extinguished lights, the lamps shone once more before the shrines. Within she seemed to see the procession of cowed monks stealing down through the darkness of the transept steps to their narrow stalls, and hear their voices chanting in solemn measures the first antiphonal hymn of the coming day.

The mirage vanished suddenly as a dream, and the edifice crumbled imperceptibly back into the old tower Kathleen knew so well: a concrete substantial shape, thrusting a massive head into the clearer sky from the deep shadow of the undergrowth in which it stood. Kathleen gave a light sigh. She had known it was a vision while she looked, but she was sorry that it had gone so quickly. Her old tower! How forlorn and lonely it looked in the moonlight, without the abbey!

Suddenly the bell in the tower pealed out—once.

At that sound, so monstrously improbable, she started to her feet in terror. This was no dream, no fantasy of the past. That single clang of the long-silent bell had reached her ears too distinctly to be mistaken for the play of fancy. Clearly and distinctly she had heard it vibrate through the impalpable darkness to her startled ears. Who had entered the deserted bell-tower and pulled the rope at that hour of night, and for what purpose? The door of the tower was usually locked, and who knew where the key was?

What did it mean? A warning, a call, a portent? To her alone? If so, why? Nervously, she glanced from the window again, half expecting to see the abbey floating in the air, lighted and complete, the repetition of the earlier chimera. But no, the tower showed solitary in its familiar stark outline of ruin; decrepit, grey; an ivy-clad remnant of the past, as lifeless and forgotten as the

bones of the monks buried beneath the greensward at the foot.

The one faint toll of the bell had been real. She knew that. The tremulous, mellow sound seemed still to be chiming in her brain. Perhaps the bell would ring again. She stood still, straining her ears. Nothing more: only that one haunting note. Enough; yes, quite enough! It meant that somebody had gone to the tower; was still there, in the darkness, alone. She shuddered at that thought. She could not shake off the impression that this was a summons, a command, sent to her for some purpose which she dared not try to guess. Only it was borne in upon her imperatively that she must investigate it, that she must find out who had rung the bell in the tower. How was she to do it? Go there alone or arouse somebody in the house? She did not know. She only knew that she had to do something. Actuated by a force stronger than herself, she walked to the door and threw it wide open.

The corridor stretched empty and dark before her. The house was wrapped in silence. Not a sound. In the distance the white figure of Echo loomed dim and mysterious, her turned head listening intently. How long Kathleen stood motionless at her door with uplifted candle she never knew. Then to her eyes a light appeared like magic in the distance of the other corridor, a light which gleamed larger as the figure which carried it advanced. It was Robert Lynngarth.

She would sooner have seen some one else, but her fear and agitation were gladdened at the sight of any human soul. Walking quickly, he approached the corridor in which she stood.

"Robert!" she breathed.

He stopped astonished at the sight of the little figure in night garments, and disordered hair.

"Kathleen!" he exclaimed. "What is it? Is anything the matter?"

"I was going to look for somebody," she answered in agitation. "I was frightened . . . I heard a noise."

"What kind of a noise?"

"The tolling of a bell, from the old abbey tower . . . where we used to play."

His glance showed utter incredulity.

"That bell has not been tolled for ages. Who would ring it now? Are you sure you were not mistaken?"

"No, no, no!" She uttered this rejoinder rapidly, as though to assure him by the mere repetition of the negative. "I heard it distinctly."

"How often?"

"Once."

"Only once?"

"Yes, only once," she said, clasping her hands nervously. "Do not imagine that I dreamt it."

"I do not say so," he replied. "My thought was that it might have been caused by a bird—perhaps an owl—brushing against it in the dark."

"That is not likely." She spoke decidedly. "How could an owl get into the tower? I think——" She stopped suddenly.

"What do you think?" he asked, with a searching glance.

"That it may have something to do with his—Sir Roger's disappearance."

Again he looked at her keenly. "I do not understand how that could be," he said.

"He might be locked up in the abbey tower," she whispered.

"What would take him there?" he asked coldly.

"Oh, how can I say?" she rejoined, clenching her hands convulsively. "Who knows what has happened in this terrible house during the last week? Mystery upon mystery, and then—this."

Her finger pointed through the doorway to the bedroom window, where the outline of the old abbey tower showed darkly on the rise against a background of moonlit sky. He followed her gesture, then his eyes returned to her face.

"What do you mean to do?" he asked.

"I am going to see who rang the bell."

"You will do nothing so foolish," he said authoritatively.

She flashed a scornful glance. "So that is your advice? Do you think that I am afraid of the dark?"

"That was not in my mind," he retorted coldly enough. "What I thought is of small moment. I may believe you to be the victim of an hallucination, or to have imagined this thing. But if my father—or anyone—is shut up in the abbey tower, how is it that there was only one single peal of the bell?"

She was rather staggered by the force of this question, but she would not allow him to see that it weighed with her. There followed a period of silence, in which Robert stood quite still, in a listening attitude, his face turned in the direction of the window. But there was no sound: all things were wrapped in quiet.

Kathleen broke the silence:

"I will go and see."

He looked at her, speaking masterfully:

"You shall not go."

"You must not prevent me."

"I cannot prevent you, certainly, but it will be much

wiser for you to remain here while I go. I will return quickly and tell you."

She glanced at him with eager eyes.

"You will go?"

"Yes; at once."

"Oh, you are good." There was gratitude in her look now, for at that moment she was forgetful of all things in the sense of his nearness, his strength, and the memory of the old affection between them. The light of the candle she held in her hand fell upon the dusky clearness of her small face, the pure curve of her dark eyebrows, and the sparkling eyes uplifted to his.

He was not looking at her. His head was still turned toward the door in listening attitude. But the silence remained profound; silence without, within. They might have been alone in a dead world wrapped in everlasting peace. He sighed. An expression of weariness on his face, and something more than that—something she could not read—caused her to cry, instinctively, nervously:

"You are not angry with me, Robert?"

"Why should I be angry with you, Lady Fibbets?"

He left her at that, but she stood in the corridor looking after him until he reached the head of the staircase, and disappeared through the opening between the velvet curtains held apart by the white arm of the statue. Then, remembering with a swift mantling blush that she was really wearing very little more than that scantily clad goddess of antiquity, Kathleen ran back into her bedroom to dress and await Robert's return.

CHAPTER XX

FATHER AND SON

OUTSIDE the house Robert made for the tower by the shortest way, passing swiftly through the wood with the careless ease of one familiar with the path. A silver moon hung motionless in the dark vault of the sky, and the light fell through the leafy screen, making gleaming tracks between the trees. He hastened forward beneath branches which drooped wearily in the lifeless air, into the heart of the wood where night held sway, and nothing broke the heavy silence but the distant song of the river beyond the flats. Where the trees thinned out again he caught a glimpse of the stream, whispering and murmuring between reedy banks. His eyes followed it down, and then turned across the open space to where a light flickered in the darkness. It came from the cottage of the gamekeeper. Robert stared at the faint light steadily, as if wondering why the occupant kept such late vigil. Next moment he resumed his way towards the tower.

It rose before him at length, a stout shape muffled in ivy, unlighted, silent, grim. It was a picture of desolation at that moment. If the bell aloft had been rung, the ringer seemed to have gone on his way again, unless he still lurked within the tower's dark jaws. Robert, standing in the open space before it, seemed in no hurry to find that out. He stood still, looking round him. The place and the hour might well have induced contemplation in a meditative mind. The silvered wing of night rested upon a peaceful scene: a sleeping country-side,

woods and meadows, and a glittering river. In the profound stillness some woodland creature sniffed hard by, then scuttled away into the undergrowth from the human figure which had come to its nocturnal haunt at that unseasonable hour.

Robert aroused himself, and approached the tower. From it no sound or light had come. In massive outline it confronted him, ivied and grey, as it had confronted other eyes long crumbled to dust, a solemn and worn relic of a forgotten past. It seemed impossible to believe that anyone had visited it that night for the purpose of tolling the bell which now hung motionless and invisible in the shadow of the tower.

The oaken door was shut. Robert tried it, but the stout oaken frame refused to yield. Although he thought it was caught or fastened inside, he struck a match and sought for the key, but he could not find the hiding-place which Kathleen had shown him. He returned to the door, but it would not budge. Evidently it had been firmly secured in some way, and that struck him as very strange. He stood back, his face white in the moonlight, as though a nameless fear had settled upon him. After a moment's pause he beat on the oak with his hand, and called out loudly. The shrunk timber gave back a dull sound, but nothing more, and his hail died away into absolute silence. Again he hammered and called, and again there was no response. At that he fell back once more, eyes riveted on the silent bell-tower, as if in quest of something human or spectral within the shadow of the bell.

As he stood thus he saw a light glimmer between the trees, swaying erratically, as if guiding footsteps unaccustomed to the way. Instinctively he marked its progress as it came nearer. At last a man's form emerged from

a clump of trees, and by the lantern he carried Robert recognized Glenluce. He came straight towards the tower, and in the circle of light shed by the lantern their faces regarded each other questioningly. Glenluce spoke first.

"I have been sent in search of you," he said. "Kathleen came to my room after you had gone, and told me about the bell. The child was nervous and full of fears on your account. She accused herself of being selfish—of allowing you to go into danger. What is it? Have you discovered anything?"

"No sign of a bell-ringer, if that is what you mean," rejoined his companion moodily.

"There may be some one in the tower, if Kathleen heard aright. Have you tried the door?"

"It is fastened."

Unconsciously Glenluce seemed to doubt this assertion by rattling the door of the tower himself. He also hammered on the door, and loudly called. The wood rang with his cry, "Is anyone there?" but the silence within the tower remained unbroken. He swung the light on the door, while the other stood by. His scrutiny finished, Glenluce looked round.

"I think we could manage to break the door in," he said.

"Perhaps the key is on the grass," suggested Robert.

Glenluce seemed to think the idea good, and examined the grass with the light.

"No," he said, rising. "I cannot see it. But look here! Some one has been about recently."

Robert's eyes followed the direction of his finger. The clinging undergrowth at the entrance of the wood was broken and beaten down, as though somebody had forced a furious way through.

“Odd!” Glenluce bent down again to examine the place, first setting the lantern where it cast a steady flame in the windless air. “The marks seem to have been made quite recently,” he said. “It is very strange; I do not understand it at all. I wonder——”

He broke off sharply as something bright in the undergrowth caught his eye, and picked it up. In the light the thing he had recovered glittered in the rays of the lantern, and they could both see it for what it was: a pair of gold-rimmed glasses attached to a black silk ribbon. The two men exchanged glances. Glenluce was about to speak, but Robert forestalled him.

“My father’s glasses,” he said, with swift memory of when he had last seen his father wearing them.

Glenluce nodded slowly, a look of fear in his eyes, and again turned to the tower, environed by flickering shadows.

“Lynngarth, Lynngarth! Are you inside? It is I—Glenluce.” His voice went up into the night, and died away. He turned to his companion. “I think we had better break in the door,” he said.

Robert made no reply, but came forward and placed his shoulder against the door. Glenluce made a move to help him, but the younger man motioned him back. The door leaped and creaked in its shrunken frame, and held for a while against Robert’s efforts, then gave way, and flew open. Through the doorway the moonlight fell upon a square recess and green fern-fronds growing in the thick, grey walls. But the tower seemed empty. Glenluce, holding up the light, saw Robert’s eyes turned towards the opposite wall.

“Give me the lantern,” he said.

He entered the tower, holding it up, and it was then that Glenluce caught sight of what he had not previously

seen: a few stone steps cut in the thickness of the opposite wall, leading up into another apartment beneath the bell-tower. Glenluce eyed these steps with a certain uneasiness. Their worn and narrow tread carried his mind back to mediæval times, and suggested the stealthy foot-falls of sandalled monks. No doubt they were picturesque by day, but at that moment they inspired strange thoughts. A small door was visible at the top of the stone steps, and Robert, indicating it with his hand, made his way up the stone flight with the same restrained composure he had shown throughout.

The door at the top had no lock, but was fastened with an iron handle. The door yielded a little when this was pushed down, then stopped. Robert Lynngarth held up the lantern to see the obstacle within, and Glenluce peered over his shoulder. He it was who caught the first glimpse of a prone form within.

"There is something lying on the floor," he said in a hushed tone. "Go gently, Lynngarth."

Robert Lynngarth glanced and fell back. Glenluce caught the light from his hand and pushed through the partly opened door, well knowing what he was going to find there. His companion came after, and they stood together, looking down.

The light fell clear upon the form of Sir Roger Lynngarth, lying on his back in a posture of stark rigidity. Glenluce bent over him, but the body was cold.

"We are too late," he said, looking up. "Your father is dead."

"Dead!" cried Robert. The lantern in his hand shook. "Dead?" he repeated, and put the light down by the dead man's side.

"Yes; he has been dead for hours," said Glenluce sadly.

They regarded each other in silence, their faces in

shadow, the dead man's in the light. The same thought was in the minds of both, and Robert gave utterance to it:

"Who rang the bell?" As he spoke his eyes searched the shadowy recesses of the bell-tower above his head. Glenluce looked from the troubled face of the son to the still features of the father, as though seeking an answer to the question there. In the faint diffused ray of the lantern the late owner of Redways seemed at that moment to be engaged in a profound contemplation of the depth of the tower directly above his head. The rope dangled from the darkness above, drooped on his breast, and trailed to floor beside his outstretched and open hand. Glenluce, looking down at him, was seized with the terrifying thought that the dead man had himself rung the bell which revealed his secret hiding-place, and brought them to his assistance too late. He thrust that gruesome idea from him with quick determination, with an irritated perception that this strange discovery had allowed the intrusion of morbid thoughts into the orderly current of his mind. In his position calmness and common sense would be expected of him, in the face of such a tragedy. Besides, it was apparent to him that his poor friend had been dead for some time.

"The bell? Who can say?" He spoke confusedly, still struggling against the reaction of his thoughts. "His murderer, no doubt—though why, I cannot tell."

"Do you think he has been murdered?" Robert asked in a low tone. "I see no marks—no blood."

"Why——" Glenluce looked up in sharp surprise, then scanned the body again. It was as Robert said. There was no blood or signs of violence. The dead man, attired in evening clothes such as those Glenluce had last seen

him wearing, had the look of one who had died in sleep; of one who might have come to that place for the purpose. Again Glenluce had to fight down morbid and nameless thoughts before he could reply.

"I think it must be murder." He spoke with an effort, but firmly. "We must act quickly, though I expect that the scoundrel who did this is far away by now. Oh!" he exclaimed, struck by a sudden thought. "You know this tower, I expect, knew it as a boy, no doubt. Think now, is there anywhere in it where a man could hide—any recess in the thick walls?"

"None."

"Could it be possible for anyone to climb up to the belfry and hide there? Suppose, for instance——"

He made a gesture in the direction of the trailing rope, and Robert understood the trend of his thought.

"Impossible—I should think," he said.

Seemingly Glenluce was not altogether reassured. He took the light and held it high, flashing it round the grey contour of the ancient walls. Far up, a narrow aperture in the thick stonework admitted air and light, and above this could be discerned the triangular platform of the turret, within which was suspended the motionless shape of the bell. But there was no human figure crouching on the platform around it, and a careful scrutiny convinced Glenluce that it was impossible as a hiding-place, even if any human being was sufficiently agile to reach that eminence by clambering up the rope.

"You are right," he remarked to his companion. "No one could hide up there. Nevertheless, somebody has been here and escaped, but how?"

"By the window opening downstairs, I should say."

"Leaving the door fastened inside? Well, this is a

terrible discovery, and I do not understand it at all. However, we must not stand here talking. There is much to do."

"What must we do?" returned Robert.

"In the first place we must have the body removed from here."

"Can we have it removed home?"

"Of course. Why not?"

"I thought nothing could be done until the police had seen——"

"I am the police," said Glenluce austere. "I have noted everything."

Robert nodded. He had forgotten the other's official standing.

"Come, let us return to the house and arouse assistance," said Glenluce. "We must also get a doctor and acquaint the police. We had better go at once."

Robert hesitated. "Hadn't one of us better remain, until they come for the——" He held off the word with a visible effort.

"Indeed, that would be wise," replied Glenluce. "Perhaps——" He stopped, and his thought died unspoken. "Which of us shall it be? Would you prefer——"

"I will stay here until you return," said Robert.

"Then I'll leave you the light." Glenluce put it into his hand. "The moon will be sufficient guide for me back. I'll send some men from the house, and return myself after I have telephoned for a doctor and the county police."

He turned to go. At the door he glanced round, and saw Robert standing by the dark figure on the floor, looking down upon it. The lantern in his hand revealed his sad and thoughtful face, with the shadow of some secret reserve on it. Such was the impression Glenluce carried

away from the tower, and it was one he was never able to forget.

The door swung to behind him. The man left behind remained motionless, the lantern suspended in his hand. The sound of his companion's departing footsteps died away, and was succeeded by an intense and profound stillness. On the wall a lizard showed like a streak of yellow upon the grey stone, peeped at figures of father and son with glistening eye, and vanished stealthily back into its chink. A snail, creeping upwards to some distant goal, shrank back into its shell when it reached the focus of the unaccustomed light.

For some minutes Robert stood still, gazing intently down upon the face beneath him. Then, as if yielding to some uncontrollable impulse, he sank on his knees by his father's side.

CHAPTER XXI

COLLOQUY AT REDWAYS

THE Master of Redways made his last home-coming at dawn; borne slowly through wood and garden to the silent house. It was Glenluce who broke the tidings to those within, and saw the still form of his old friend laid in the small oak bedroom downstairs. Glenluce did all he could to spare the young wife, now alone in her room, and refusing to see anyone. It was Glenluce who sent for doctor and police, and relieved the dead man's son of those irksome duties which tread upon the heels of death. The son, now Sir Robert Lynngarth, was well content that this should be so. He seemed to lean upon his father's friend and to be grateful for the quiet thoroughness with which he restored some semblance of quietude and order to the dismayed household.

Lady Mercer, too, was glad to have him there: tactful, sympathetic, a gentleman; a man you could depend on. Yes; he was all that, and more. At that moment she was talking to him in a nook of the breakfast-room, where a window looked out on the lawn. Kathleen was upstairs, and Robert was walking in the garden. Lady Mercer was glad they had gone. She wished to have Glenluce alone.

She had dressed and descended as soon as the news reached the house. In that crisis her nerves had not failed her. As she said, age had the virtue of endurance, and bore calamity better than unseasoned youth. The lamentable event had been debated between them, and

the doctor's opinion discussed. Glenluce had sent for the nearest doctor, who had examined the body and expressed the view that Sir Roger had died from a seizure: heart failure, probably. No; nothing to suggest violence. There were no external injuries of any kind beyond a slight superficial scratch on the throat, which could have been caused by the act of shaving. Dr. Dawfield added that death had taken place some hours before, and expressed the opinion that in all probability Sir Roger had died suddenly on the night of his disappearance. Beyond that he could not go. The deceased gentleman's regular medical attendant might be in a position to say more, and perhaps give a certificate. Thus the little spectacled country doctor, rather nervous and flustered at this summons to the great house at dawn; vague and hesitating in his answers, yet precise enough to lighten Glenluce of some dark fears which had preyed upon him since the finding of the body.

Strange and mysterious still, but speculation was best deferred until the arrival of Dr. Reginald Drewer, the Redways physician for a quarter of a century or more, summoned by telegraph from a country consultation twenty miles away. Yes; strange, perhaps, and very sad too, but better to know the worst than suffer the harassing uncertainty of the last twenty-four hours. So thought Lady Mercer, who had started visibly at Dr. Dawfield's view, as if it banished something uneasy from her own mind also. She had no doubt Dr. Drewer would tell them more. He was quite a friend, and knew Roger's constitution thoroughly. It was very terrible that Roger should have died so. Lady Mercer had her own theory to account for it. Roger had stepped out of the French window of his library to take a stroll in the late evening, was overcome with sudden illness, and crept to the tower

to summon the household by ringing the bell. The theory left several points unexplained, but there was the doctor's opinion to support it. Besides, Lady Mercer was not concerned with explanations. She had Colonel Glenluce to fall back upon. It was his duty, not hers, to investigate.

She was looking at him now with serious eyes. Her face showed fatigue—was a little haggard. Loyalty to the family was the great thing in her mind at that moment. She had something to say to Glenluce, but did not quite know how.

Glenluce stood soberly by as she talked, rather uneasily, for her. She mentioned Stella and Kathleen. She was anxious to spare them as far as possible. They were both young, and ought to be protected.

"Though Kathleen is bearing up bravely," she said. "But Stella—I am anxious about her. Completely overcome, since the moment I broke the news to her. Kathleen would like to see her, but she'll not have anyone near her. She is grieving terribly. I suppose we can only be patient, and wait. Stella has a tender heart—most sensitive and affectionate. I can see now that she must have been very fond of Roger." She paused before adding: "When you came yesterday I never thought or imagined——"

Again she broke off in the effort to utter what she wished to say. Then courage came for her to continue:

"Colonel Glenluce, I want you to forget what I said yesterday."

He was doubtful of her meaning: of how far she went.

"About what?" he slowly asked.

"Robert and Stella." She breathed the names.

"Do not talk of this now, Lady Mercer," he gravely rejoined.

"I must. It was a mad and wicked thing to do. A woman's tongue is an unruly member, Colonel Glenluce, acting on its own volition sometimes. I should have been silent. My idea was that Robert and Stella were attracted to each other, but there was nothing in their conduct to warrant my strong words. What I told you was mere surmise—unwarrantable surmise on my part. Please believe that. I little thought of the terrible discovery awaiting us when I spoke. That is my only excuse."

He was glad to hear this, and told her so. "Think no more of it," was his advice. "We have other things to occupy our minds. I have sent for detectives, as you know. They will be here by the next train."

Lady Mercer was startled. "Detectives! I had forgotten. Are they necessary—now?"

"A mere formality," he hastened to add: "That is, if Dr. Drewer confirms the other opinion. Do not alarm yourself needlessly. You shall be spared as much as possible."

"I was not thinking of myself," she replied, "but of poor Roger's feelings, if he were alive. There will be talk—publicity: the thing he loathed most. He cared more for the family name than anything in the world. Cannot this be avoided, Colonel Glenluce?"

"I am afraid not." He was uncomfortable, feeling that she should not have made this request. "The facts must be investigated, you know. It will be nothing, if Dr. Drewer thinks with Dr. Dawfield."

"An investigation into the death of a Lynngarth!" She sighed, and was silent for a moment. "Does Robert know of this?"

"He must expect it."

Again she was silent. Robert passed by the window,

still walking in the garden. Her eye dwelt on the sight of him there, thoughtfully and earnestly. Her next remark surprised Glenluce.

"I wonder will Robert remain in England—now."

He looked his surprise. "Surely! His duty lies here, now that his father is gone. He is the last of his line."

"The reason which took him away twelve years ago still exists, I imagine, whatever it is."

"That should be all past and buried now."

"Perhaps. It depends upon what it is. I thought you knew—that Roger told you." She looked at him calmly.

"No," he replied. "He did not."

"Then Robert is the only person alive who knows this secret, whatever it is."

"Quite so. Need we discuss this, Lady Mercer?" He met her eyes gravely. "It is not quite the moment——"

"Curiosity was not my motive," she broke in. She sighed again. "I was thinking of the future, wondering what would be the outcome of it all. That's why I think it would be better if there was no publicity over Roger's death, for Robert's sake." And with that she left him.

Glenluce remained, pondering over her remarks, and why she had made them to him. She had failed to perceive the delicacy of his position. It should have been clear as daylight to her that he, the friend of the family, had also to do his official duty. Lady Mercer should not have forgotten this, and he had been prompted to remind her. If Sir Roger had died naturally that did not justify Lady Mercer overlooking her appeal to his high official position for help. Better, no doubt, if she had not done so, for his professional honour now called upon him to probe into matters perhaps better left alone. Two of his

subordinates were hastening to him for that purpose. Circumspection was necessary: a wise reserve in what he imparted to their experienced ears. What good could come of investigation, after all, when there was nothing for the law to avenge?

They came presently, the trusted subordinates, in a car sent to the station for them; great men in their own way, bringing with them an official photographer and fingerprint expert. The rural policeman outside the study door fell back in a tremor, as if divinity approached. Superintendent Merrington, massive, immense, arbitrary, nodded a ponderous head at him as he passed through. Chief Inspector Luckraft, thin and pale, disdained to cast a glance at the obsequious constable. The door closed behind them, and the policeman resumed guard. The expert and photographer waited outside until they were needed.

In the Painted Room Glenluce imparted to his henchmen such particulars as he deemed advisable. They listened with attention, Merrington in Sir Roger's chair, Luckraft leaning across the back of another. Glenluce spoke chiefly to Luckraft, whom he regarded as his best detective: one versed in every move of the game, and an officer of few mistakes. Merrington did not think so highly of his colleague's ability; certainly not while he was about.

"An unusual case!" was the latter's comment when Glenluce concluded. "What do you think, Luckraft?"

His colleague nodded without reply. He had been noting the contents of the room. The bureau seemed to attract his attention.

"If the doctor's diagnosis is correct, there will be nothing for us to do here," pursued Merrington.

"We shall be able to decide that presently," said Glen-

luce. "Dr. Drewer has just sent a telephone message to say that he will be here soon."

"The other doctor's opinion seems definite enough, but Sir Roger's own doctor should be able to put the matter beyond all doubt. About this bell, now. Was Miss Kathleen Chester the only one to hear it ring?"

"Yes," said Glenluce.

Merrington shook his head.

"I don't understand that, but it is not very important, if death is due to natural causes. Miss Chester may have imagined she heard it in her sleep."

"Rather a big assumption, that," remarked Glenluce, with a slight shake of the head.

"Oh, I don't know. She was no doubt overwrought by her guardian's disappearance, and from what you tell us this old abbey seems to have been a favourite haunt of hers. It's unusual, though, this ring of the bell—whether real or imaginary."

"Even if Miss Chester imagined the ring, that does not explain what took Sir Roger to the abbey," Glenluce observed.

"Out walking, I should say, and overcome by illness," suggested Merrington.

"That is Lady Mercer's view," remarked Glenluce.

"There seems no other explanation to me. But we had better look at the body. Where is Luckraft?"

During this conversation Luckraft had opened the French window and walked out on the lawn. From there he had vanished from view. He now reappeared around the side of the house, examining the grass.

"Footsteps here," he observed, as he drew near.

"I was out there last night," replied Glenluce, with a swift recollection of the circumstances.

"They are indistinct, but I hardly think they are

yours," said Luckraft. "They puzzle me, rather—a deep and light footstep alternately. Unfortunately, it is impossible to take satisfactory casts of them in the grass. I will examine them more closely later. Meantime, I should like to have a look at the inside of this bureau, Colonel Glenluce, if you have the key. I can see fingerprints on the surface."

"I was examining it myself, last night," remarked Glenluce, unlocking it. He had not yet decided whether to inform his subordinates that he had allowed a letter within it to be spirited away under his nose. That was an admission he hesitated to make if there were no occasion for it. The letter was addressed to him privately, as a friend, by the dead man, and if it concerned his son (as Glenluce believed) its disappearance seemed to have no bearing on Sir Roger's death. Glenluce decided to say nothing. He could disclose the information later, if necessary.

As for Luckraft, the interior of the bureau seemed to interest him; not the drawers, which he left unopened, but the surface itself. Glenluce wondered what he saw in it. After an interval Luckraft spoke.

"There is more than one finger-print here," he said, raising his head. "It will be as well to have them photographed before they disappear."

"It looks like waste of time—to me," said Merrington.

"One never knows," murmured the other. "They are very clear. It would be a pity——"

"Peters can photograph them while we are in the other room," broke in Merrington impatiently. "As this seems to be merely a case of accidental death, I think of returning to London at once."

He walked into the inner room as he spoke, but Luckraft waited to give an instruction to the policeman at the

door before following. Then he joined Glenluce and Merrington in the bedroom.

They stood at the edge of the bed, looking down upon the quiet form lying there. The colourless face was tranquil, the eyes peacefully closed. Glenluce, motionless and absorbed, felt a touch on his arm. Luckraft, bending close, pointed to a faint mark on the neck. Glenluce nodded.

"Yes; the doctor mentioned it. Might have been done while shaving, he thinks. I have another theory—the undergrowth around the abbey where the body was found. The brambles and blackberries are very thick. I scratched my hand there this morning in the dark."

"It looks as if there is another slight mark, higher up," continued Luckraft.

"I don't see that," remarked Merrington sharply.

The talk ceased. Luckraft moved away from the bed, employing himself silently in looking round the room. They were interrupted by a sharp knock on the outer door. Glenluce looked into the library and saw a tall figure on the threshold. It came forward.

"How do you do, Colonel Glenluce? I came at once—the moment I received your wire. A sorrowful occasion, this."

Glenluce shook hands with Dr. Reginald Drewer, whom he knew well; a tall and portly man, with glasses and a glossy beard. In spite of the latter almost obsolete appendage, Dr. Drewer looked clever and interesting, and was an imposing and handsome presence. Glenluce liked him, and knew that Sir Roger had placed great faith in his skill.

"Sad, indeed, Drewer," he replied. "Thank you for coming so soon. Dr. Dawfield thinks our poor friend

died from a seizure, but we should like your authoritative opinion."

"Quite so—quite so. Lady Mercer has explained. A very tragic death indeed. But I am not surprised. Now——" His eyes turned towards the bed.

Glenluce acted on the hint. "We will await you in the other room," he said.

The three withdrew, and Glenluce closed the door behind them. A young man, tall, pale, and spectacled, was in the act of packing up a photographic impedimenta in the other room. He looked towards Luckraft.

"Two capital impressions, sir," he observed, moving towards the door as he spoke.

"Very well, Peters. I think you had better return and develop the plates at once. They may be needed."

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CHAPTER XXII

DISCOVERIES

THE subsequent medical disquisition on the causes of sudden death was followed more attentively by Glenluce than his subordinates. The interest of those efficient officers in the case diminished perceptibly when they heard Dr. Reginald Drewer's first words. His observations on *angina pectoris* may have had a professional tendency towards obscurity, but he made it quite clear that Sir Roger Lynngarth had fallen a victim to that baffling and secret disease, and had died more than twenty-four hours before the discovery of the body. Indications of violence? None whatever—certainly not! Sir Roger had been under treatment for advanced cardiac affection for some weeks past, and Dr. Drewer was not surprised at his sudden death. His was an established case, with the usual symptoms: faintness, blanching of the skin, difficulty in breathing, though not much pain. But *angina* varied greatly in that respect—there was such a thing as *angina sine dolore*; that was, *angina* without pain. The symptoms varied. It was not always easy to define their pathological significance, but unfortunately in the case of Sir Roger there was no room for doubt. The disease was well established when he sought medical advice—it usually was, in such cases, Dr. Drewer added.

“When did he first consult you about this?” Glenluce asked.

Dr. Drewer gave the date as early in September, the day after Sir Roger's son returned from abroad. Mr.

Stonnard, who telephoned for him, had informed him of that event when he arrived. He found Sir Roger looking fatigued and ill, and his breathing was difficult. He said he had had an attack of faintness in the night which had distressed him, and he thought he should like to be examined.

"I examined him and questioned him about what he called his slight attacks of dizziness, but, unfortunately, the disease had reached a stage beyond medical skill." Dr. Drewer shrugged his shoulders. "As a rule, it is not until the attacks are severe enough to alarm the sufferer that medical advice is sought, and then it is too late."

"Did you tell Sir Roger?" said Glenluce.

"In a guarded way. He insisted on knowing. I told him that the heart was affected, though I kept from him that he was liable to die at any moment. I told him—which was quite true—that there was no cause for alarm, and that if he was careful there was no reason why he should not live for years. On my advice he saw Sir Charles Radwell. Sir Roger went up to London for the purpose, as he did not want Lady Lynngarth to know. Sir Charles confirmed my diagnosis. He told me that the great vessels were impaired and the coronary arteries degenerate. It was his feeling that Sir Roger's family should be informed, but Sir Roger would not hear of it. He said he would not have Lady Lynngarth alarmed. In some aspects he was a rather difficult patient—difficult to advise, I mean. I did not press the matter. There seemed no immediate urgency. Frankly, I did not expect this rapid fatal termination. It is possible to suffer from *angina pectoris* for many years and then die of something quite different. One can never tell, though. It is inadvisable to be too dogmatic about a disease like this—decidedly so. It is very difficult to define in some

forms, though Sir Roger's case was one of the essential type. In his case no cure was possible: only simple measures of relief, such as little exertion, freedom from worry and anxiety, and as much fresh air as possible."

Glenluce heard Dr. Drewer with mingled feelings, but relief was uppermost. It was a sad business, but might have been worse—yes, very much worse. The medical verdict which assured him that his worst fears were groundless also simplified his course considerably. He was glad that he had not mentioned the vanished letter to his subordinates. That episode now appeared to his eyes in a new aspect. The letter had probably been written by Sir Roger in the sense of impending death, and had been taken by his son in order to safeguard the secret—his secret—which he feared, no doubt correctly, had been enclosed within. An improper thing to do, but only Robert Lynngarth could decide with his conscience whether the circumstances justified the deed. Glenluce felt that it was not for him to pronounce upon the morality of an act which freed him from a responsibility from which he shrank. There were still some points unriddled, but the realm of mystery was not so extensive as he had feared. If Sir Roger had died naturally, he had died away from his house, and the place of death had not been discovered until revealed by a mysterious ring on an unused bell. That last point was beyond Glenluce's comprehension. He had not attempted to reason it out, but he had not lost sight of it, none the less. The plausible theory that Sir Roger might have lain in the tower for some time before he was able to summon the household to his aid was finally upset by the calm precision of Dr. Drewer's statement that death had occurred more than twenty-four hours before the body was found. With the hope of obtaining some

light upon the obscure point of the bell, Glenluce asked Dr. Drewer how he came to fix the time of death.

"I do not fix it," replied the doctor. "That would be impossible. What I said was, that as rigidity had passed away, Sir Roger had been dead for some considerable time—twenty-four hours at the least, and perhaps longer. It depends on the duration of rigor mortis."

"And you cannot say how long that lasts?"

"Quite impossible. It is influenced by many things: age, the cause of death, atmospheric temperature, and so on. It sets in from three to six hours after death, and may last hours, or perhaps days. Twenty-four to forty-eight hours is about the average, but it is very unsafe to make any general inference regarding it. All I can say in Sir Roger's case is that it had passed away. Beyond that I cannot commit myself."

"But is it not strange that he should die where he was found?" asked Glenluce. "What would take him there?"

"As to that, I cannot say," returned Dr. Drewer decidedly. "It is not my province to speculate. He may have taken a walk after dinner and gone to the tower, feeling ill. As for the strangeness of it, permit me to remark that heart disease is no respecter of time or place."

"True," said Glenluce, "but perhaps the exercise of walking in his enfeebled state——"

"Not such exercise as that," interrupted the doctor. "It was beneficial in his case. Sir Roger was fond of strolling slowly about his grounds, and I told him it would do him no harm—was good for him, in fact. It gave him the open-air life he needed."

"Still, if he went up the steps to summon assistance——"

"More likely for fresh air. Breathlessness and faintness are very distressing symptoms in angina, and the night before last was very close. There are only a few steps, if I remember rightly."

"He fastened the door behind him, I understand," said Luckraft.

"Strange, but just what I would expect Sir Roger to do, if he went there feeling ill. He would not care for any chance intrusion on his privacy in his illness—or at any other time, for that matter."

"Assuming it happened so," said Glenluce, "there is still one point, and the most important of all, which remains unexplained. Who rang the bell?"

"And for what purpose?" added Luckraft.

"I do not think much of that point about the bell," said Merrington. "It might have been Miss Chester's fancy. Nobody else heard it, and she only heard one faint peal."

"She was right, as it turns out," remarked Glenluce.

"Then perhaps a bird," suggested Merrington.

Glenluce shook his head. "That's unlikely. I confess that I utterly fail to understand this ring of the bell. It seems to lend a sinister colour to Sir Roger's death. You must remember that the door was fastened inside, and we had to break it in."

"Is there a window?" asked Luckraft quickly.

"A window opening—yes, though I did not know that until we had forced the door."

"Then whoever rang the bell had to get through the window?" said Dr. Drewer.

"Or left that way," observed Luckraft, with a significant look. "In any case, the fastened door carries with it the assumption that the visitor knew that the body was within."

"Why should anyone go there?" asked Merrington. "To ring the bell?"

"No," returned Luckraft hesitatingly. "But suppose some one did know that Sir Roger's body was there, and went there at night to search it, and while doing so accidentally rang the bell."

Glenluce looked at Luckraft quickly, but Merrington shrugged his shoulders.

"Too far-fetched!" he said. "A very weak presumption, without motive or intention. There might be something in it if Sir Roger had been murdered. As it is——"

"Then how do you account for the ring?" asked Luckraft.

Merrington shrugged his shoulders again, but did not reply. He had his private opinion about the bell, but did not deem it politic to express it.

"The bell is a curious point," observed Dr. Drewer. "Miss Chester must have heard it. My own feeling is that there is a quite natural and simple explanation of this seemingly mysterious summons. I have an idea——"

"I should like to hear what it is," Glenluce broke in.

"I should prefer to go to the tower before saying anything more definite," rejoined Dr. Drewer, with a trace of hesitation. "If you gentlemen will accompany me——"

"One moment!" exclaimed Merrington. "In my view the bell is not worth considering. In your opinion, Dr. Drewer, Sir Roger Lynngarth might have died at any time?"

"Why, yes; if you wish to put it that way," said the doctor.

"You see nothing unusual in his death in such circumstances?" pursued Merrington.

"Nothing whatever," replied Dr. Drewer emphatically. "When I report the death to the local authorities, I shall

inform the coroner that, in my opinion, there is no necessity for an inquest."

"Very good." Merrington lifted his great frame from the chair in which he had been sitting. "Then, if you'll excuse me, Colonel Glenluce, I think I'll return to London immediately. I am very busy, and there is nothing to detain me here after what Dr. Drewer has said. There is a train I can just catch, if I go now. I may as well send Peters and Cordell back by it also. There's nothing here for them to do."

Glenluce assented with a nod, and Merrington went out with a hasty farewell. Luckraft made no sign of accompanying his colleague. Dr. Drewer, glancing at his watch, proposed that the three of them should walk up to the tower, and they set out.

The trees were clad in the deeper tints of late autumn: russet, orange, and crimson, and the way through the wood was carpeted thick with leaves, which crackled sharply underfoot. The tower was quiet and deserted, and the door was open, showing the interior and the steps leading to the upper room. Glenluce and the doctor ascended, leaving Luckraft examining the floor below.

Glenluce pointed out where the body of Sir Roger had been found, and indicated the exact position at the doctor's request. He briefly narrated all the circumstances, and the doctor listened intently. When Glenluce concluded he stood staring up into the bell-tower, as if ruminating deeply. The rope, falling from the gloom above his head, hung beside him. Dr. Drewer tested it with his hand, still apparently deep in reflection. Then, to his companion's surprise, he laid himself on the dusty floor beneath the turret, pulled the rope down, and released it. A faint single peal of the bell followed this experiment, which seemed quite unaccountable to Glen-

luce. Dr. Drewer rose to his feet, and dusted his clothes.

"Merely a test," murmured the doctor, as he caught the other's questioning look. "I wanted to ascertain whether the bell would give more than one peal if the rope was held and released that way. As I said, I've the feeling that the ring Miss Chester heard is easily accounted for. I've good reason for thinking so, though I should like to have more time to think it out. Still, so far as it goes, my idea is——"

"Yes?" said Glenluce eagerly, as the other came to a sudden pause.

Luckraft appeared in the doorway, as though summoned from below by the peal of the bell. Dr. Drewer glanced at him and remained silent. The detective proceeded to examine the upper room without inquiring why the bell had been rung. Then he asked the doctor a question:

"Would shock have hastened Sir Roger's death?"

"Most decidedly," was the reply.

"If he had been attacked?"

"What do you mean, Luckraft?" said Glenluce, considerably startled.

"A bird might have flown through that window and blundered into his face," said Luckraft, after a pause.

Dr. Drewer stared at him. "You're talking nonsense," he said brusquely.

"Perhaps I am," murmured Luckraft, with an impassive face. "My mistake, doctor."

Dr. Drewer, irritated, said no more. Glenluce felt that the renowned Luckraft was not showing to particular advantage at that moment. After a moment of silence Glenluce turned to the ruffled doctor.

"You were saying you thought you could account for the ring of the bell."

“A theory—I said.”

“I should like to hear it.”

“Wait until I have given the matter more thought. I cannot discuss it further now. I’m a busy man, and my professional duties await me. Good morning!” And he was gone.

Glenluce looked up, faint displeasure in his eyes. “I am going back to the house, Luckraft, where you will find me if you wish to see me.” He put his hand upon the door and went out also.

CHAPTER XXIII

REFLECTIONS IN A TOWER

LUCKRAFT remained behind, deep in thought. Peace brooded in the tower, but downstairs the door creaked querulously in the wind. Luckraft heeded it not. His eye dwelt in sober meditation on the rope which fell from the bell-tower and coiled like a sleeping snake at his feet. Luckraft was in the frame of mind which used to be called a brown study. The trained faculties of a beneficent public servant were not satisfied with the investigations into Sir Roger Lynngarth's death. It was not that the excellent subordinate suspected foul play. Luckraft did not doubt the correctness of the medical verdict, but he was beset with the feeling that there was more in this case than met the eye.

There were points which interested him professionally, and he would have liked to examine them further. Unusual points too, as he considered them. He enumerated them now. A scratch, footsteps on the lawn (the right foot deeper than the left), and a similar footprint outside the tower. What bearing had these matters upon the death of the owner of Redways, whose body had been found in a tower with the door fastened inside, with a window opening downstairs large enough for a man to squeeze through, as Luckraft had proved by experiment? One way and another, there would have been the making of a pretty case if the deceased baronet had come to a violent end, instead of dying peaceably in the tower, like a man in his bed. And there was this bell, now. Yes;

it would have made a very remarkable case. The inward feeling of Chief Inspector Luckraft at that moment was that this tame conclusion in such unusual circumstances was not quite fair—not altogether in accordance with the rules of the game. The points remained in his inner consciousness and bothered him so much that he was led to form a theory to account for them. Strictly speaking, it was not a theory so much as an idea, which, if he could have proved it, might have helped to solve some of the problems of his mind. Unfortunately for his zeal, he did not see much opportunity of testing it in the light of further investigation. The doctors had spiked his guns there.

His idea overlooked the bell, which was the most strange and unaccountable point in the case. Luckraft puzzled over it fruitlessly. Had some one, knowing the body was there, gone to the tower to inform the household at Redways, and Redways only, by ringing the bell softly, instead of making a clamour which would have aroused the country-side? That seemed unlikely enough, but what explanation was there acceptable to both reason and common sense? Luckraft could see none. Excluding such improbable contingencies as a bird's wing or a gust of wind, he was faced with the uncanny enigma of a dead man in a lonely tower, and a bell which rang without hands. And why had not the bell been rung until twenty-four hours after the baronet's death?

Strange things happen in this world, and Luckraft was impervious to surprise as a general thing. His occupation had taught him to distrust the surface of appearances. He knew that circumstance sometimes lied more convincingly than humanity, perhaps through lack of speech for contradiction. But here was something seemingly beyond demonstration or proof: a matter which

alarmed the senses if the idea of human agency were excluded. How could a piece of mechanism, now motionless in the tower, make its brazen manifestation without aid? The purpose of the ring had been achieved, but what mysterious force had directed the solemn announcement which informed the sleeping household of Redways that the dead body of the master was within the tower? Had the bell actually rung without hands, by some means beyond human understanding? No. Luckraft rejected that supposition instantly. It went outside the teachings of experience, and sent intelligence wandering into the region of fantastic conjecture. The bell had been rung by human means, but the reason for its peal, so disturbing and perplexing, was difficult to imagine, or even faintly to guess. It was either the act of insanity or of deep and cautious design, for some purpose unexplained. Thinking thus, Luckraft was visited by a further idea.

His meditations were intruded upon by the sound of footsteps rustling in the fallen leaves of the woods outside the tower, and perfectly audible in the intense stillness within. He looked through the narrow slit in the thick masonry, and discerned two figures walking through the trees in the direction of the alder pool. The tall bronzed man he recognized as Sir Robert Lynngarth, whom he had seen on his arrival at Redways. The lady with him Luckraft did not know, but intuition told him that she was the beautiful young wife of the deceased baronet, of whose existence Colonel Glenluce had made him aware. She was talking, and Sir Robert was listening, and putting in an occasional word. Lady Lynngarth's face was pale and anxious, and it was apparent to Luckraft that her companion was endeavouring to reassure her. Luckraft would have given a great deal to have been able to overhear them. Watching them closely, he was convinced

that theirs was no ordinary conversation. They walked fast, until they reached the fringe of the woods. Here they stopped, and Luckraft saw Lady Lynngarth clasp her companion's arm with both her hands, in a manner which was both confiding and fearful. In response, Sir Robert raised his other hand gently, then disengaged himself and walked away. Lady Lynngarth stood looking after him for a moment, then she turned in the opposite direction and retraced her steps through the wood.

The experienced eyes of Chief Inspector Luckraft read a message of warning into that last gesture of her companion. That uplifted hand, with its implication of silence, kindled in his breast those man-hunting instincts which were his passion and career. He had no difficulty in arriving at the conclusion that this secret meeting in the wood at such a time was in some way connected with the death of Sir Roger. Why had his son and his widow gone there to speak quietly, unless they had something to conceal? He did not know what it meant, but he was determined to find out, if that were possible. This stolen conversation between Lady Lynngarth and her husband's son invested the mystery with a more perplexing and mentally exhausting tint, but it also simplified matters by indicating to Luckraft the direction his formless suspicions should take.

In this mental disposition he descended from the tower to make his way back to the house. His path was difficult, but that did not weaken his determination. He reflected that he knew practically nothing of the circumstances beyond what Colonel Glenluce had imparted to him and Superintendent Merrington. And Dr. Drewer's statement blocked the way to further official inquiry. In any case, Luckraft could proceed no further without the consent and sanction of Colonel Glenluce. Luckraft knew

little of the political head of his department, but he did not suppose that he would permit a mere fishing inquiry into the affairs of a family with whom he was on terms of confidence and friendship. Luckraft was well aware that he had very little to go upon, and that any attempt on his part to make his departmental head share his own suspicions would, perhaps, only bring upon him a snub for officiousness, which, in view of all things, might not be altogether undeserved. A lesser man might have been tempted by these considerations to leave the case where it was. The eminent Luckraft, inspired with a passion for his work, desired nothing so much as to pursue his investigations into Sir Roger Lynngarth's death, if that course could be safely fitted into the diverse and complex elements of the affair. Already he felt all the zest of a hunter on the track of his game, but caution warned him that further pursuit called for the utmost wariness on his part.

Cogitating thus, Luckraft had almost reached the house when he observed a man emerge from the buildings at the rear and open a gate which led into a foot-path across the fields. Luckraft could hardly conceal his pleasure as he recognized the butler of Redways in the approaching figure. He regarded the encounter as an unexpected but well-deserved piece of luck. Fortune, indifferent as a woman to brains, rarely favoured ability. That, at least, was Luckraft's experience. The zealous officer, bestowing a passing glance on the butler when he first saw him, had summed up that excellent functionary as a coward with sly eyes, and had thirsted for the opportunity of turning him inside out. It seemed as though he was to be denied that operation by the unexpected progress of events, so this tardy reparation of fortune was the more welcome. He stood where he was, waiting. The

unconscious Jauncey, coming nearer, revealed himself in even more unflattering aspect to the detective's critical eye. He was attired in outdoor garb, and wore on his head a narrow hard-crowned hat which appeared much too small for the large flushed face which it was ordained to shelter. Jauncey carried a bag in his hand. Seeing him thus, Luckraft varied his first pleasing appellation by now mentally designating the butler as a fat and foxy simpleton. "This is into my hands," was his additional unspoken thought.

Jauncey, lifting his eyes, saw him, and came to a stricken pause. His large flushed face assumed a curious mottled tint as he moved slowly on.

"A fine day," observed Luckraft with a gracious nod, as he drew near.

Jauncey's unspoken reply, delivered with increasing pallor, was: "What do you want with me?" What he actually did say was: "A very fine day indeed."

"Going to the village?" continued Luckraft, with the same deceptively pleasant air.

Jauncey admitted it with the look of a man who feared the answer might incriminate him.

"On business," he added vaguely, as though he put forth that plea in mitigation of the offence.

"Ah!" Chief Inspector Luckraft smiled graciously, and went on, as if the idea had just occurred to him: "I wish to go to the village myself. Perhaps you will show me the way."

They set out across the foot-path which stretched diagonally across half a dozen fields to the village.

At the end of an hour Chief Inspector Luckraft reappeared at Redways with the satisfied air of a man who has not spent his time in vain. He had succeeded in turning the butler inside out. The task had not been

difficult. Jauncey had proved a tractile victim—had, indeed, assisted in the flaying process. His natural cowardice and shaken nerves offered him up as a willing victim. He told the detective all he knew about the family he served. From him Luckraft learnt of the strange cloud overhanging Robert Lynngarth's life; of his departure from England twelve years before, and his equally mysterious return a few weeks before his father's death. Jauncey also placed the detective in possession of the additional piece of information, which had reached the servants' ears, that Robert Lynngarth had contemplated leaving Redways and England again on the very day that his father had disappeared.

Interesting facts, these, and so Luckraft thought when they were imparted to him; but an even more interesting revelation was something which moral cowardice led Jauncey to impart as overheard by him on the night of Robert Lynngarth's return. He told Luckraft that as he passed through the hall just before dinner on that night he saw Sir Robert and Lady Lynngarth speaking together at the foot of the stairs. He had caught only one word of that conversation, but it had made some impression on his mind at the time. As he approached on his way to the dining-room, he had distinctly heard Lady Lynngarth address the returned wanderer as "Jim."

"Perhaps Lady Lynngarth was referring to some one else," Luckraft had interjected.

No, Jauncey was quite certain Lady Lynngarth meant Mr. Lynngarth—now Sir Robert. Why she called him Jim he didn't know. He had forgotten all about it soon after.

"It only came to my mind just now when we were talking," continued Jauncey, endeavouring to call up a look of rectitude.

Luckraft, turning over the butler's disclosures afterwards, came to the only possible conclusion that Robert Lynngarth and his father's wife had known each other before, perhaps under other conditions. Jauncey had mentioned that the second Lady Lynngarth had lived abroad—had travelled, was the way he put it. But even assuming that, it did not explain all the component parts of the puzzle. What had taken Robert Lynngarth out of England in the first place, and what had kept him away so long? Again, what was the reason for the recent contemplated departure which had been interrupted by Sir Roger Lynngarth's death? The relations between father and son were the reverse of cordial, according to Jauncey. "They did not seem to get on well together," he had said. Jauncey also told Luckraft that father and son were shut up in the Painted Room for a long time on the last afternoon that Sir Roger was seen alive. Luckraft, pondering over this, wondered whether the two had quarrelled.

Chief Inspector Luckraft had the quality known to men as imagination. Imagination will carry a man far, especially when strengthened by some skill in induction and a faculty of trained observation. Imagination soared away with him now, and took him to dizzy heights. When he returned to earth, after the lapse of an hour or so, he sought an interview with Colonel Glenluce.

That interview took place in the smoking-room at Redways, where Colonel Glenluce invited his renowned assistant to sit down, gave him a cigar, and placidly waited to hear what he had to say. He was far from expecting the bomb-shell which the Chief Inspector had come prepared to throw at him. Luckraft, sitting on the edge of an antique chair, unlighted cigar in hand, eyes fixed thoughtfully on his official chief's face, launched his

bomb without any preliminary warning of his intention. In a mild voice he expressed the opinion that Sir Roger had died in his room, but that his body had been removed from Redways to the abbey tower where it was found.

“What makes you think so?” asked Glenluce quickly.

Luckraft, ready for that question, assumed a reflective manner. In his reply, he appeared to choose his words very carefully. The idea had first occurred to him when examining the sequence of footprints which led across the lawn from the Painted Room, and then disappeared. Or, speaking more accurately, it was the depth of those footprints, and of the right foot in particular, which had struck him as significant. He had found it quite impossible to make such a deep impression with his own foot, although he had made several experiments in that direction. In trying to account for it, he had conceived the notion of a man carrying a weight—obviously a heavy weight. The idea of a dead body, as a heavy weight, had occurred to him as the next step in this process of reasoning.

Glenluce interrupted at this stage to ask if the theory depended solely upon the footprints leading across the lawn.

Luckraft replied, rather slowly, that he had more than that to go upon. He had discovered further traces of these footsteps just outside the tower.

“You said nothing of this at the time, you know,” remarked Glenluce, looking up.

“No,” said Chief Inspector Luckraft. “I had a reason——”

“What was it?”

“I wasn’t quite sure of what they meant. I wanted to give the matter more thought.”

“I do not think you have very much to go upon.”

"Perhaps not," replied the Chief Inspector. "So far, it's merely an idea—nothing more. I thought I'd better tell you, though. If the body was carried away, it explains several points about Sir Roger's death which I've not been able to understand. It would account for Sir Roger being found in the belfry, and for the door being bolted inside. And there's that bell, now. How did that come to ring? That's what I want to know. Dr. Drewer was going to explain it, but he wasn't able to after all. If the body was carried there, one could account for the bell—in a way."

"What do you mean by that?" said Glenluce slowly.

"I've been trying to work out how that bell came to ring. It didn't ring itself, of that I feel sure. Well, suppose that there were two persons aware of Sir Roger's death, and that they were both concerned in the removal of the body, or, at least, one removed it and the other knew where it was concealed. One of the two subsequently felt remorse for what had been done, and paid a stealthy visit to the tower to reveal the reason for Sir Roger's disappearance by ringing the bell——"

"This sounds all very high-flown and imaginative to me, Chief Inspector," interrupted Glenluce sharply. "If such a thing had really happened, why did this mysterious bell-ringer give one single pull at the bell, instead of ringing a vigorous peal?"

"I've thought of that too, sir," rejoined Luckraft cautiously. "The person ringing the bell may have had good reason for it—may have wished merely to inform Redways, and not alarm the country-side."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Well, sir, I've been making a few quiet inquiries, and I understand that Sir Robert left England under a cloud some years ago, and returned quite unexpectedly to find

his mother dead and his father married again. Why he left England in the first place does not appear to be known, but his father was probably aware of the reason. I have been informed that Sir Roger and his son were alone together in the room called the Painted Room for a considerable time on the last afternoon that Sir Roger was seen alive. There seems to have been some estrangement between them, and they may have had words during this interview. What took place then? Nobody knows."

Glenluce heard this in perfect silence. He now spoke concisely:

"Are you suggesting that Sir Robert carried his father's body away from the house to the tower where it was found?" he asked coldly.

"No, sir; I would not go that far. But I do believe the body was carried away, and further inquiry might bring the facts to light."

"What purpose do you suggest would inspire such a perfectly senseless outrage?"

"As to that, sir, I have pointed out——"

"It seems to me that you have been letting your imagination run away with you."

"Well, I have been merely endeavouring to do my duty. I have made certain inquiries——"

"For which there was no need, Luckraft. As Sir Roger died naturally, there was not the slightest occasion for these investigations on your part. You have exceeded your duty—very improperly so, in my opinion."

Indignation ran high within Luckraft at this rebuke. As if he did not know his duty! He wished now that he had said nothing at all. When he spoke, it was in an impassive voice:

"I thought I would tell you what was in my mind, sir, in case you might think the case needed further inquiry."

And with this perfectly truthful statement of his motives Luckraft waited anxiously for Glenluce's reply. That came without delay:

"I see no occasion for further inquiry. In any case, that is now the province of the coroner, and I shall do nothing to influence his judgment. Dr. Drewer will write to him, telling him the facts, and expressing the opinion that Sir Roger's death is due to natural causes. Dr. Drewer will add that he sees no necessity for an inquest. So do not give yourself any further trouble, Luckraft."

"Very well, sir," murmured Luckraft, rising as he spoke. "I shall return to London."

CHAPTER XXIV

THE MOTILITY OF DEATH

GLENLUCE did not repent that decision, then or afterwards, and indeed, he had no cause. Of what use to stir up those uneasy phantoms into life; to ferret out this hidden scandal of a family which counted him as friend? It was not as though any good purpose could be served, or that action was required of him for the vindication of his official position. If Robert Lynn-garth had actually carried his father's body from the house that night, his offence was more in the nature of a misdemeanour than a conspiracy to defeat justice, because if he told the truth he ran the risk of bringing his own secret to light. Apparently that secret, whatever it was, was fraught with dire result to himself, if revealed—a thing of tremendous consequence. Every action of his life was directed to safeguarding it. Because of it he had gone abroad, and remained away for twelve years. And finally it compelled him to remove his father's body and take a letter from his bureau rather than let the world know what had taken place in the study that night. A fatal secret to possess! Glenluce was glad—more glad than ever—that he knew nothing of it. The knowledge might have made his path more difficult.

He had weighed these matters among others before making his decision. He even asked himself whether there was anything in the suggestion which Lady Mercer had with belated regret termed an unwarrantable surmise on her part. Glenluce found himself watching Stella and Robert, though he did not like doing so, in order to

gather whether anything in their attitude might provide a better key to the puzzle of the hidden events in the Painted Room on the night that Sir Roger met his death. But he saw nothing. They appeared rather to avoid each other than feel the force of a mutual attraction. Stella, distressed but beautiful, seemed to depend on Glenluce during those trying days rather than on her husband's son. Glenluce was conscious of her looking at him rather often, as though she knew that his sympathy, though unobtrusive, was always there. He was glad of that, because he wanted to help her as far as lay in his power. Sometimes he met her eyes looking into his with a wistful appeal, and he would smile gently back, with an air of sympathetic understanding. She had other symptoms of grief which Glenluce flattered himself he understood. A beautiful young widow! What were her thoughts? Some day, no doubt, she would marry again. Why had Lady Mercer spoken so unkindly of Lady Lynngarth? Because she had a wistful, appealing glance? His eyes, dwelling upon her beauty, saw the explanation in that. So far as observation went, Robert had few thoughts to bestow upon his father's young widow. A baseless insinuation, this! There was such a thing as painting the devil too black. Robert had much upon his conscience to answer for, but not this. His load was heavy enough as it was. And yet, in spite of all, Glenluce believed him to be a profoundly unhappy man rather than a wicked one.

Glenluce had plenty of opportunity to observe Robert in the interval between the death and the funeral. But knowledge did not come with scrutiny; he remained a mystifying figure. They met from day to day. Glenluce tried to talk with him, but the younger man did not respond. He was courteous, but distant, living in the family circle a life which seemed to Glenluce almost as

solitary and remote as his former island existence. He dined with the family, but spent much of his time alone. After dinner he took himself off to the Painted Room, where he sat far into the night, reading or writing perhaps. No matter how late Glenluce retired, there was always a light glimmering beneath the door at the end of the long corridor. His father's body had been removed to another part of the house to await burial, and Robert Lynngarth made the two rooms his own. Glenluce and Stonnard had the smoking-room and the billiard-room to themselves. Stonnard was relieved that this was so. The secretary was nervous in the presence of his departed employer's son, and once, over a final whisky-and-soda in the smoking-room, he confessed to Glenluce why.

"A queer chap, I think—like a figure in a dream. Very different from Sir Roger. There's something in his eyes which haunts one, don't you know. . . ."

It was a definition leaving little to be desired, Glenluce felt. Robert Lynngarth was haunted by the ghost of his past—invisible to other eyes, but ever before his own—a grisly familiar which accompanied him by day and shared his couch at night. Chained to that constant companion, life held nothing for him. In spite of all he believed Robert had done, the heart in Glenluce's breast stirred with pity at the thought of what this man had gone through. Suffering and anguish he had endured, and must still endure. His eyes were haunted, as Stonnard expressed it. Even the Roman law might well be satisfied with the unflinching acceptance of such a burden of pain through long years.

What did the future hold for him? Nothing, as far as Glenluce could see. His father's death had not lightened the burden he was compelled to bear; if, indeed, it had not added to it. His face gave no hint of the inward

current of his thoughts, but there was in his air, very faintly defined, a kind of cold resignation which touched Glenluce by suggesting a man standing on the brink of an abyss across which no friendly hand might be stretched in aid. That was an apt comparison. Help was impossible for a man in Robert Lynngarth's position. Glenluce realized it, but the wish to help him remained.

The day came for the funeral and the reading of the will. The churchyard was thronged with the best of the county, and many curious glances were directed at Robert, standing a little apart, as motionless as the other figure in the coffin. "That's the son—disappeared for twelve years, and just turned up again. They say he and his father quarrelled." Thus whispered gossip, censorious even at the graveside. But Robert, at that moment, seemed as indifferent to criticism—even if he had heard it—as his father was for evermore.

Afterwards the will was read in the library before the ladies of the household and Robert and Glenluce. Lady Mercer sat in a straight-backed chair, glasses up, Kathleen and Stella beside her; Kathleen, sweet and calm, casting occasional glances towards Robert opposite, and Stella, fragile and pale, with downcast gaze, looking like a white and gold lily in her black dress—such was Glenluce's comparison as his eye fell upon her. The will bore the date of more than two years before, shortly after Sir Roger's second marriage. If he had wished to alter it, he had not done so, though the letter calling Mr. Baron to Redways reposed in the solicitor's pocket as he announced the clauses of the will in existence. It left the bulk of the testator's fortune to his second wife, together with the family residence known as Redways, "provided proof is forthcoming of the death of my only son, Robert." In event of Stella's remarriage, Redways was to

be held in trust for Kathleen until she reached the age of twenty-five. Apart from that contingency, Kathleen was left two thousand a year, to be settled upon her and her married issue, if any; failing that, to be at her own disposal unconditionally.

Mr. Baron, untying more documents, produced a codicil drawn up shortly after Robert Lynngarth's return, altering the provision about Redways, "because of the unexpected appearance of my son Robert, who inherits the entailed portion of the estate with the title." Otherwise the contents of the will remained unaltered. Robert's existence was grudgingly allowed for, and he was to receive what he was entitled to under the entail: no more. The bulk of the fortune went to Stella. Glenluce saw Robert fix his eyes upon Stella when this was made clear. He did not understand the look, but it did not seem one of resentment.

Lady Mercer had her own opinion of all this, and expressed it freely, not then, but afterwards to Glenluce, when she got him alone. She thought the will a very improper one.

"It's quite ridiculous of Roger," she said peevishly, "carrying his absurd prejudices and pride of caste into the grave with him. What's to be done now, I'd like to know? Robert cannot keep up Redways on the entail. The estate doesn't yield much nowadays. Yet Roger was devoted to the place, like all the Lynngarths, and lavished money on it. What did he think was to happen to it, I wonder? Kathleen wants to give Robert her two thousand a year: says she has no claim on it, and won't take it. Bless the child! She's talking nonsense of course. Robert is not the man to take it from her, even if she could give it to him, which of course she cannot. I've been trying to make her understand that. In any

case, none of us know what Robert is going to do——”

She broke off sharply, and looked at him with sagacious eyes.

“Do you remember the talk that we had together on the day after poor Roger’s death?”

“Yes,” he said, wondering what was coming.

“I said then that I wondered if Robert would remain in England now.”

He looked at her inquiringly. “Will he not?” he asked.

“I am afraid he meditates going away again.”

“Has he told you so?”

“Not in so many words. He gave me an indication though, at the breakfast-table this morning. I was asking him if he was going to thin the elms at the side of the house, as poor Roger had intended doing, and he said that would fall to some one else to decide—not him. He walked away without another word.”

“His words may not have meant what you think. You may be putting a wrong interpretation upon them.” He spoke soothingly.

“I wish I could think so,” she sighed. “It would be madness—folly—for him to go away again, now that his father is dead, and there is no one to take his place but Robert. The question of money could be arranged. I have far more than I need, and I love Redways. Still, I feel these thoughts are useless. He will go away again.”

“Not for long, I hope.”

“That is what I fear. As I told you, the reason which took him out of England before still exists. He has said nothing definite yet, but I think we ought to know. Would you mind seeing him, Colonel Glenluce, before you go back to London, and ask him what he intends to do?”

“Wouldn’t that come with better grace from you?”

he asked. "You are a member of the family, and I am not."

"It's beyond me. Robert is difficult. You could talk to him in a way that I couldn't. He will listen to you."

"I'm not sure of that, but I'm willing to try, if you think it is likely to do any good. Where is he?"

"In the smoking-room, I think."

"I will go there and see."

"Thank you," she said gratefully, as he left her.

Robert was not in the smoking-room. The sole occupant was Dr. Reginald Drewer, who had attended the funeral, and was now in a large chair, cigar in mouth, seated well back from an early fire which cast a flickering glow on his glossy beard and handsome face. At Glenluce's entry he looked up and nodded.

"Can you sit down for a few minutes?" he said. "I have been waiting to see you."

"I was looking for Robert," rejoined Glenluce, taking a seat.

"I wanted to tell you my opinion about the ringing of the abbey bell. I thought you would like to know."

Glenluce looked at him keenly. "That's interesting," he said. "Do you think you know how it happened?" he asked, point-blank.

"Yes, I'll tell you confidentially. It's strange, and borders on the weird: not at all advisable for other people to know. Yes, I should think it had better be confidential between us." Uttering these words, Dr. Drewer moved his chair closer to Glenluce. "After all, it's only my belief—my theory. It could be proved, perhaps, but better not—much better not. There are some things better left unproved, and I think you'll agree with me that this is one of them. The bell rang, though. It was not imagination on Miss Chester's part."

"I never thought so," said Glenluce.

"No; there is an explanation. Do you remember the experiment I made with the rope in the tower that day—pulling it down to see if the bell rang when it was let go?"

Yes, Glenluce remembered that very well.

"It was the single peal which puzzled me, and made me think of a bird. An owl, perhaps, blundering against the clapper of the bell in flight. That would have sufficed for the single faint peal heard. I never for one moment thought that the bell had been rung naturally—that is, by human hands. There was no reason to suppose it: all the conditions and circumstances were against it. What being was likely to have gone to the abbey after midnight, clamber in and out of a small window to find Sir Roger's body, and then notify the discovery by ringing one faint stroke on a disused bell, instead of coming to Redways and arousing the household? Sanity and common sense alike forbade such a supposition. No; the explanation must be a natural one, if one could only find it: something quite simple yet convincing, as the explanation of all such mysteries usually is. If not a bird, then lightning or wind—even wireless. The bell had rung, but not through human agency. So ran my thoughts. I was wrong."

"What do you mean?" exclaimed Glenluce.

"Not what you think," was the quick response. "The bell was not rung by the intrusion of some mysterious human visitant, nevertheless——"

He broke off and looked gloomily in the fire before adding:

"I suppose you have never been interested in the phenomenon of death?"

"Not scientifically, if that is what you mean," said Glenluce, in some surprise.

The other's nod indicated that such was his meaning. After a pause he went on:

"I call it a phenomenon, which it is; or, rather, the cessation of life is. Throughout my career and during my college days, I have always been greatly interested in the causes of death, and in the analysis of those obscure diseases which develop secretly in the human body. I have pursued investigations in these subjects both at home and abroad. It is not a popular thesis, as I am well aware, but it is a study which has its distinct uses for humanity at large. When we understand death better we shall not fear it so much."

"All this is no doubt true," observed Glenluce mildly, "but——"

"Wait!" exclaimed Dr. Drewer significantly. "You'll see presently. We go through life with many fallacies, which exist even regarding the end of it. Did you ever see an actor die convincingly on the stage, with dropped jaw? I never did. Yet the jaw drops at the moment of death, or shortly after, except in tetanus and some cases of poisoning. There is also much nonsense talked about the last breath, and the stoppage of the heart—by no means infallible signs. In fact, there is no end to the number of common errors concerning death, with the result that many people go through existence—and pass out of it—tormented with the fear of premature burial. But the most widespread error is that all activity stops instantly with the cessation of life."

"I certainly thought so," remarked Glenluce.

Dr. Drewer looked at him, and added abruptly:

"Have you ever watched a corpse at night?"

"No," said Glenluce, with a shudder.

"If you had you would know differently. I have. There is such a thing as cadaveric activity—movements in the muscles of the face and hands. I have observed them; carried out experiments. In the interests of science, of course. This is merely by way of preamble. What I want to make clear is that my investigation of this subject has led me to study closely not only the signs of death but subsequent symptoms of independent activity in the tissues of the body which may be termed cadaveric phenomena."

"I understand," said Glenluce, repressing a slight qualm.

"The most interesting of these is the phenomenon known as rigidity," continued Dr. Drewer briskly. "I have observed some extraordinary cases of muscular contraction in this state—quite remarkable indeed. Rigor mortis varies in intensity and duration, but on an average makes its appearance by the sixth hour after death. When Sir Roger was brought back to the house rigidity had passed away; there was certainly no sign of it when I examined the body some hours later. It is necessary to bear that in mind when listening to what I am about to tell you. It was that fact which gave me the first glimmering of the truth. When I accompanied you to the tower that day my first idea was that Sir Roger, in dying, had fallen on the rope, dragging it taut, and that as rigidity set in the contraction of muscles altered the posture of his body sufficiently to allow the rope to escape, thus causing the faint clang which was heard by Miss Chester."

"I can understand that," said Glenluce quickly. "Do you think, then——"

"No," interrupted the doctor solemnly. "That was

not the way. It was stranger still. After you had described to me the position in which you found the body, I no longer thought that idea so probable, though it was not impossible. The real explanation came to me two or three nights later. Do you remember defining to me how you found the body, lying face uppermost, right under the belfry, with the rope drooping on the breast? Thinking over that, the true explanation came to me quite simply. It was the key to the solution, as it were. It explained the ringing of the bell. It explained, also, that rigor mortis passed away at the moment when Miss Kathleen Chester heard the faint peal of the bell in her room. Now, do you understand?"

"Why, no, I cannot say I do," said Glenluce slowly.

"Because it was Sir Roger's hand which caused the bell to ring. His fingers had been clutching the rope, and when they dropped away the bell gave the one stroke which reached Miss Chester's ears."

"You must be more explicit," Glenluce said, assuming a coolness he by no means felt.

"My meaning is very simple. Sir Roger was found dead under the rope, which lay on his breast. As rigidity invaded his body the right arm flexed across the breast, and the fingers, contracting across the rope, clutched it automatically, and the muscular contraction of the arm muscles tightened it. Thus the rope remained until rigor mortis passed away, when the arm unbent again, and the fingers relaxed, releasing the rope and causing the bell to give the single peal heard by Miss Chester."

"Your explanation is wonderful, but seems incredible," said Glenluce.

"On the contrary, it is so possible that I'm surprised the explanation did not occur to me sooner," observed

the doctor. "The attitude of the body, and the position of the rope across the breast, makes it quite a simple thing, though strange enough to you, no doubt."

"But Sir Roger's arms were resting by his side when we found him."

"That was because rigidity had passed away, and with it the contraction of the muscles, so the arm returned to its former position. Here is confirmatory proof of what I say." From a pocket-book he extracted a small packet, which he unfolded. "Do you see that? It's a thread of woven fabric: hemp, from the rope. I found it between the first and second fingers of Sir Roger's right hand, when I was examining the body."

Glenluce looked at the woven fragments without speaking.

"That's the explanation, you may depend upon it," said the doctor, nodding at him. "Nothing simpler, when you come to think of it. I'll demonstrate it, if ever I have a favourable opportunity. Quite in my way too. Investigation of this sort is my passion—my hobby. If I ever get the chance of carrying out this experiment under favourable conditions I'll let you know. Well, good-bye, Glenluce. I've patients waiting for me, but I'm glad to have been able to see you and explain this baffling ring."

They shook hands, and Dr. Drewer went out with a smiling face, handsome, portly, capable. Glenluce was glad to see him depart. The doctor had waited to oblige him, but his story was as repugnant to Glenluce as the coldly scientific way in which his theory had been explained.

Was this, then, the explanation of the ringing of the bell? Dr. Drewer thought so, and he ought to know. He was a man who, in his own phrase, made a hobby of

such things. A repellent hobby, truly! He had hinted at demonstrating the truth of his idea, but Glenluce desired no such ghastly tests. The story had told upon his nerves, as it was. For the rest, he was content to accept Drewer's theory as the solution of the mystery of the bell, and so he finally dismissed the subject from his mind.

He was about to leave the room when Robert entered. Glenluce, regarding him kindly, spoke:

"I am going back to London this evening. Can you spare me a few minutes' conversation before I go?"

Robert gave him a quick glance which it was difficult to define, but answered coldly:

"Certainly." And, closing the door behind him, he sat down.

CHAPTER XXV

IN DEEPENING SHADOW

THE memory of that interview remained with Glenluce, deepening his pity for Robert Lynngarth and his future. He learnt things which were wrung from a heavy heart; a scanty confidence which revealed little, yet sought to justify an inexplicable line of conduct in friendly eyes. It may have been that beaconing light which led him to say what he did, as though his soul yearned for sympathy while compelled to remain inscrutable. At first, Glenluce had little hope they would progress that far. Robert was very guarded, and his monosyllabic replies brought them no nearer to the subject in the elder man's mind. Glenluce was too vague and nebulous; his remarks too carefully framed. That would not do, and he saw it. So he came to the root of the matter with a plain and unequivocal question which could not be ignored.

"I have something to say to you about yourself, Robert."

The other, who had been striding up and down the room as though his perturbed spirit would not let him rest, turned an embarrassed glance towards his companion.

"Yes; what is it?" he said.

"I really have no right to question you"—Glenluce spoke with hesitation—"no right, that is, except being a friend of the family. You will understand that, I hope, and not take offence——"

"I understand," said Robert. He took a chair, and fixed his eyes upon his companion's face.

"You are remaining in England, I suppose, now that your father is dead?"

"Why do you ask me that now?" replied Robert, quietly enough; but Glenluce had the curious impression that he spoke in a tone of relief.

"Some plans were formed before your father's death, plans which would have taken you out of England again," he went on. "You told me of them after your father's disappearance, that night in the smoking-room, if you remember. Afterwards, Stonnard told me a little more. Some mining expedition abroad, I understand."

"Yes. It was my father's wish that I should develop this mine—my own wish also, I may say."

"I presume that these plans have been changed by your father's sad death."

"No—merely deferred. Now that matters have been adjusted, I think of leaving England again very shortly."

"To return again before long, I hope?"

"I think not. It is my intention to remain abroad."

He spoke composedly, as if there was nothing beneath the surface of his words; but Glenluce knew there were hidden depths. He was moved to ask impulsively:

"Is this necessary?"

"I think so." The answer was cold and distant.

"Your decision will cause a great deal of comment, now that you are Sir Robert Lynngarth."

Robert shrugged his shoulders indifferently, but remained silent.

"I am well aware of your indifference to that sort of thing. I have not forgotten our conversation on the night of your return. But the position is changed, since then—changed by your father's death."

"In what respect?"

"You have duties to perform. You are an Englishman, and the word means something to you. You are the last of your line, and the bearer of an honourable name. You should stay in England."

"For what purpose?"

Glenluce met his glance candidly. He had sought this turn in the conversation, and he pursued it deliberately:

"Because it is your duty to settle down at Redways, marry, and have a family."

"Such things are not for me."

His voice was colder than ever, but Glenluce was not deceived.

"Is there some reason—some insurmountable reason—which compels you to leave England?" he slowly asked.

"I fancy you know that there is—that my father told you."

"He hinted at some early embarrassment—nothing else."

"I can tell you no more than that."

Glenluce hesitated, then leaned a little towards him. "If I could help—if there is anything I could do, as your father's friend——"

"Thank you, but you can do nothing."

"I am sorry."

"It is not worth your while. Pity is wasted on me, I assure you."

"I was not thinking of pity when I offered my help, but of something more practical. Such assistance as would enable you to remain in England."

"I repeat—that is impossible."

Glenluce hesitated. "You mean that the cause which took you away from England twelve years ago now compels you to go away again?"

Robert also paused before replying. "Yes," he said, "that is so." He went on, speaking slowly, weighing every word: "Do not think that I am ungrateful. I would accept your offer if I could. I would even confide in you, if that were possible. But I can do neither the one nor the other. I must bear this burden alone, and because of it I shall have to leave England again."

"Are you sure you are not taking an exaggerated view?" persisted Glenluce. "Twelve years is a long while ago, remember. It may be——"

Robert broke in with a laugh which was without mirth. "An exaggerated view! I wish I were. Do you suppose I would have led my life of the last twelve years without some very urgent reason—the life of a man under a cloud, a man without a name, wandering up and down the unknown places of the earth? It was chance, mingled with sentiment, which brought me back to England, but I see clearly enough now that I should not have returned, and that for more reasons than one. The matter to which you have referred is something which affects others as well as myself. More than that I cannot tell you."

"Your father wanted to confide it to me on the day of your return," said Glenluce, looking at him attentively. "I gathered from him the wrong impression that it was something which concerned your two selves alone. Consequently, when your father died——"

"My father did not know all, so he could not have told you," interposed Robert Lynngarth quickly. "He received an anonymous letter which alarmed him greatly, and he sent for me to come to Redways from London. He showed me the letter. It was true as far as it went, and it had a bearing on the other—the deeper thing. I told him a little more—not all by any means—but enough

to convince him that it was advisable for me to leave England without delay."

"And remain away?" Glenluce asked quickly.

"Yes."

"It must be something of tremendous importance to wreck your life all these years, and take you away again when the future offers such fair prospects. Are you sure it is now more than a torturing memory? Do not think I am curious. My one desire, as I have already told you, is to help you if possible. Is there no other way out but this? Consider, consider well, before you decide that you must go away again."

"I have considered, and I tell you it is useless. Colonel Glenluce, cannot you conceive of a man being in a position which seals his lips for ever?"

"Not at the cost of his whole life and career. It strikes me that you are taking too quixotic a view of your dilemma, whatever it is. Nothing can justify a man sacrificing himself for an idea."

"Not when that idea is honour?"

"It is possible to rate even honour too dearly. You are not an ordinary man, remember. You have duties to fulfil—obligations to your house. You are the last of the Lynngarths. Do you intend to sacrifice duty to honour?"

"As it happens, I must. I cannot reveal the story to you, but if I could you would see that I have no option."

"I speak in ignorance of the facts—that is true," Glenluce agreed. "But even if I were aware of them I do not think they would cause me to alter my opinion."

"You say so because you do not know what they are," Robert rejoined. "I will go a little further. Suppose I were to tell you that any revelation would be dangerous to myself, what would you say then?"

"It is apparent, of course, that you are personally involved. You would not have left England otherwise. In my view, something which happened so long ago might well have been buried in oblivion, unless it involved the commission of some act which endangered more than your reputation. I speak frankly. Your attitude after this lapse of time suggests that this trouble of yours carries with it consequences which threaten you after all these years. Is that so?"

"Yes. I share the guilt; the responsibility: sufficient to compel me to carry this burden. I tell you this, Glenluce, because I trust you, and because I am grateful to you for the offer of your help. If it had been possible, I would have accepted it. As that cannot be, I do not want you to be under any misapprehension about myself. Believe me when I tell you that I am a man beyond help. I should never have resuscitated myself and restored Robert Lynngarth to life. But my mother's letter, reaching me on the island in that strange way, rent my inmost soul, overwhelmed me, and brought me back. I thought her tears and prayers had perhaps saved me: that her letter, reaching me so, had been mysteriously directed to that lonely island to draw me back. In a word, I hoped—I, who had no right to hope! I was wrong, as it turned out, yet I had reason for believing myself right. I could not, I do not now believe that her letter reached me wholly by chance. Conceive of its effect upon my mind, this letter coming to me on that island where I lived alone—addressed to Robert Lynngarth, dead, and buried, years before!"

He paused, sighed, and continued:

"I mean that, mean it literally. Robert Lynngarth died on the battlefield, and his death is so recorded. I will tell you. I went to the war in the first year, enlist-

ing in one of the Dominions, joining a regiment marked for Eastern service. On the way there in the troop-ship I got friendly with another volunteer named James Raymond. Our mutual loneliness and unsociability threw us together, in a sense, on board that great ship. I suppose we recognized in each other kindred spirits, both under a cloud, forgotten and overlooked, and we sought to lessen our loneliness by talking to each other. Of course we did not tell each other much—there were tacit reservations in our intimacy, if it could be called such—but we understood one another very well, without much speech. James Raymond came from England too, which was another bond between us. He was a profoundly unhappy man, who went to the war in the hope of getting killed. In that hope he was successful.”

Glenluce, listening to this, wondered if Robert Linn-garth had gone to the war with the same ambition. The other went on.

“On the morning he was killed we exchanged identification discs before going over the top. There was no motive behind it. Discs were frequently exchanged by men before the fighting commenced: exchanged in bravado, in inarticulate protest against the folly of it all, and the incredibly stupid officialism and red-tape which brooded like an incubus over the whole ghastly business of slaughtering men in the mass for no conceivable end. What did it matter about identification discs when a hundred mutilated corpses were flung into one grave? That was the feeling—a kind of tragic idea of equalizing things: of carrying the tangle into the jaws of death itself, as it were. I think that was the thought in our minds too. Be that as it may, James Raymond was killed that fine morning, falling face downward in a cloud of dust and smoke as the first shots rang out—smashed up, with half

a dozen others, by the first Turkish shell. There was my identification disc on him, so they buried him Robert Lynngarth. Ah, well. . . . He had no friends, not a relation in the wide world, he told me, so I took his name. He had no further use for it. He was a generous fellow, and would have given it to me gladly. I returned in the Dominion troop-ship, after an attack of fever, as James Raymond. That was easily managed. It is not difficult to deceive the official mind. We were numbers, not men, and nobody cared in the least. So I returned, and read newspaper accounts of Robert Lynngarth's gallantry—brave acts in the field, they were called. They did not bother about me of course. It was just a story, and filled up a little newspaper space. No one cared about the man James Raymond, alive or dead. That is how his name became my heritage. I used it and was known by it—kept it for years until I received the letter on the island which led me to resurrect Robert Lynngarth, supposed to be buried at Gallipoli.”

He paused, then went on:

“I shall go away, and resume the name of James Raymond. It is better for all that Robert Lynngarth should cease to exist. That name is a menace to myself—and others.”

“Not to return?”

“Never; unless something incredible happens.”

Glenluce attempted no further persuasion. The decision had been made irrevocably, and nothing could alter it. He saw that.

“I wish it could be otherwise,” he said with genuine sympathy in his voice. “If ever anything happens to change your determination, and if I can do anything to help you, you must let me know.”

“I promise that,” said Robert with a faint smile.

But as they shook hands Glenluce had the feeling that the younger man believed that time would never come to pass.

They left the room together. Robert turned down the corridor to the library, and Glenluce retraced his steps to the hall. There Lady Mercer was awaiting him. She looked up quickly, and her lips framed one word:

“Well?”

He shook his head. “You were right,” he said simply. “Robert is not going to remain in England. He is leaving very shortly.”

“Did he give his reason?”

“It is the old one. He did not say what it was.”

“I feared this.” She sighed. “He goes for good, then—to vanish completely. Is that so?”

“Yes; unless something incredible happens. Those were his words.”

“I wonder what that means?” she mused. “It is all very sad. Roger dead, and Robert disappearing abroad again under a cloud. So ends the house of Lynngarth! I had hoped, yes, I had hoped——” The opening of the door interrupted her. Kathleen appeared on the threshold, and Lady Mercer beckoned to her. “I have told her,” she said, aside, to Glenluce, before the girl reached them. She turned to Kathleen. “What I feared is true, dear. Robert has just informed Colonel Glenluce that he is going away again.”

Kathleen turned her head quickly, but not before Glenluce had seen the glitter of tears in her dark eyes. When she spoke her voice was calm and steady:

“Can nothing be done to keep him here?”

“I am afraid not,” said Glenluce.

There was silence until Glenluce spoke again.

"It is time for my departure. I must return to London."

"You will come again soon?" asked Lady Mercer.

He hesitated a little. "Yes," he said, "I will, if Lady Lynngarth wishes."

"You must, if only to protect us—three women in this great house." Lady Mercer essayed a laugh, but her voice broke.

Glenluce left the room to prepare for his journey, which did not take him long. When he came downstairs Lady Mercer and Kathleen were waiting to say good-bye to him. Stella was not there. She had sent down a message. She had a headache, and would Colonel Glenluce excuse her? He was a little hurt, but thought he understood.

"Good-bye; remember your promise," were Lady Mercer's last words to him as he stepped into the car which was to take him to the station.

The air of disquiet which hovered over Redways was manifest to him at that moment in the gathering darkness: a house of unrest, in truth, now, with three unhappy people in it. Four unhappy people really, but Lady Mercer was old, and happiness was not the heritage of the aged. Was this the end for Robert Lynngarth, that strange inscrutable figure whose eyes had met his with such a proud yet lonely glance? He did not know—who could say what pitiless fate held in store for any man? At that moment Glenluce divined things hitherto hidden from him: read certain signs aright, at the last. Intuitively he guessed part of the truth. Two women loved Robert Lynngarth—Kathleen and Stella. Kathleen's was a girl's innocent love, but it carried no message of hope to Robert Lynngarth's heart, even if he guessed

at its existence. Of Stella's feelings Glenluce did not care to think. It came to him then, though he was never aware how, that she and Robert Lynngarth had something in common between them of which he knew nothing at all. But this tie—again he intuitively realized it—counted for far less in Robert's life than the black mystery which had wrecked his career so many years ago. Sin or secret, what did it matter which, when the man who carried it was compelled to wander homeless through the world like a disembodied spirit, unhappy himself, and leaving unhappiness in his wake?

He glanced back once more. A fugitive gleam of sunlight, creeping along the ivied front, shone upon one of the deep-set windows and a woman's face looking wistfully down, but not at him. It was Stella, white and ethereal in the gloaming. A loosened tentacle of ivy outside lashed the pane in the wind, as though trying to scourge her. Then a bend in the carriage-drive hid her and the house from Glenluce's view.

CHAPTER XXVI

LUCKRAFT REVISITS REDWAYS

IT was some nights afterwards when a maid bore a card on a silver salver to Robert in the Painted Room. He started slightly at the name, and glanced mechanically at his watch, which confirmed the lateness of the hour.

"Show him in here," he said.

A moment later the girl returned with Luckraft. Robert nodded coldly, and pointed to a chair. Luckraft waited until the servant had left them, and then said:

"I am sorry to disturb you so late, Sir Robert, but my business is both urgent and important."

"You come from Colonel Glenluce, I presume?" asked Robert.

"No; on my own account," was the response.

Robert raised his eyebrows slightly. His glance rested on his visitor and took in his appearance: his pale complexion, compressed lips, and cold, colourless eyes which conveyed an impression of seeing without looking. At the present moment that glance seemed dim and impersonal, but something warned Robert to be careful during the coming interview.

"If this call has anything to do with your recent official visit here——"

"Concerning your father's death?" broke in Luckraft. "Yes and no. A coincidental bearing, let us say. It affects yourself, though, more particularly."

Robert felt himself turning pale, and looked at his caller with a deeper mistrust.

"Something affecting me?" He spoke with dry lips. "Perhaps you will explain yourself."

"Yes; I will do so." Luckraft stole a quick glance at Robert's face, then his eyes rested on the bureau again. "What I am about to tell you is in complete confidence between us. No one knows of it except myself. Not even your father's friend, Colonel Glenluce."

He paused, then went on:

"I have always been very much interested in the study of finger-prints. In fact, I started my career as an operator in the finger-print department of Scotland Yard. Our method of classification is beyond praise, Sir Robert. It is not vanity which prompts me to add that the method was partly devised by myself. I know it so well that I can lay my hand on any set of prints in our records in a very short time. The system of tabulating and indexing is perfect."

"I do not see how this affects me," Robert remarked, in surprise. "I am not interested in finger-prints."

"Perhaps not," returned Luckraft. "It's a technical subject, very little understood, which accounts for many absurd popular ideas concerning this method of identification. I must ask you to be patient, though. I will try and compress what I have to say."

"Go on, then," said Robert abruptly.

"I am pleased that you will listen." Luckraft spoke softly, and drew two slips of paper from a pocket-book. These he placed on a table beside him, and viewed with professional interest. "It is believed that no two people have the same finger-prints," he briskly continued. "A fallacy! Here, for instance, are two prints with identical patterns of ridges and hollows. The subordinate marks and the creases are slightly different, but that does not lessen the astonishing coincidence. In other respects

these two records are identical, although taken under very different conditions."

He drew nearer and placed the two slips on the bureau, then added, in an explanatory voice:

"Here is an impression of four fingers and the thumb of a right hand, taken simultaneously. The other record is also of the right hand, but by no means so clear. Nevertheless, to the expert it reveals the same characteristics as the other. That is to say, an expert would immediately declare it was made by the same hand. The second impression was taken from the surface of the bureau in this room."

"Indeed!" murmured Robert.

"Old mahogany is sensitive to impressions, as you may have noticed. They fade as soon as made, as a rule. This bureau was recently rubbed with some kind of polish which retained impressions longer. At least, it did when I saw the bureau previously, which was on the morning after Sir Roger's body was found in the tower. It was then that I observed more than one of the impressions on the second print. I had them photographed, in case they might be useful. At that time we were still in doubt as to the actual cause of Sir Roger's death."

Robert sat quite still, staring at the two small slips of paper. Luckraft continued:

"The other record was taken under much better conditions. The marks were discovered some years ago on the railing of a newly painted staircase: imprinted so clearly that they might have set there for the deliberate purpose of subsequent identification. That, of course, was not the case. If the owner of the hand had known he had left finger-prints, he would probably have risked returning to obliterate them. For they were made by a suspect."

"A suspect?" echoed Robert mechanically.

"By some one suspected of murder," returned Luckraft with gravity. "Listen! It is a long story, but it will interest you. Some years ago a police constable on night duty at Chelsea observed a young man walking fast on the opposite side of the street. He wore a long light overcoat, and a soft hat pulled well down to conceal his face. As the policeman glanced across the street the young man turned into a paved courtyard and mounted an iron staircase which communicated with a large block of flats overlooking the river. There was an agitation and haste in his movements which attracted the constable's attention at the time, but he went on his way, and thought no more of the incident.

"Returning that way some hours later when going off duty, he glanced across at the flats. They were in darkness, but a gas-jet flared in the courtyard below, as was customary. The policeman, being a conscientious officer, crossed the road to cast an eye up the staircase to see if everything was all right. As he entered the courtyard he was surprised to hear the sound of footsteps in the darkness above. He waited below, looking up.

"Presently the figure of a man came in sight. He was running down the long narrow staircase (as the policeman described it) like a madman, and kept looking backwards over his shoulder as he ran. The officer was surprised to recognize in him the young man in the light overcoat whom he had seen entering the building some hours before. The policeman's suspicions were now aroused, and he determined to stop him and question him.

"The man descending must have seen the figure in uniform beneath, staring upwards with the gas-light on his face, and, guessing his intention, came to a quick decision how to escape. Although some distance up when

the policeman first saw him, he made no attempt to go back. He came down as quickly as before, his footsteps ringing loudly on the iron stairs, until it seemed as though he intended running into the arms of the officer waiting at the foot. But when he reached the first-floor landing, where the next twist of the staircase would have brought him into full view, he placed a hand on the baluster and lightly vaulted over the staircase into the courtyard below. Before the policeman could turn round he had dashed out into the street and disappeared in the darkness.

“The policeman ran out into the road, but could see no sign of him. Realizing the uselessness of pursuit, he mounted the staircase to have a look at the flats. They seemed all right: doors closed and locked; no attempt at entry. He observed a dim hall light burning in the top flat, but the door was locked, and everything quiet within. The constable descended the staircase again and went home to bed.

“Next day the body of a man, shot through the heart, was found in the top flat. The murder was brought to light in a peculiar way. The flat was empty, and in the hands of an agent for letting. He sent a likely tenant to the place with the key, and this visitor was greatly shocked at finding a body huddled up on the carpet of the front room, where the blinds were down. The light was still burning in the hall.

“This was the mysterious crime we were called upon to solve with hardly any presumptions to guide us. The local constable’s account of the young man in the light overcoat did not help us much, because he had not seen the man’s face. The only other clue was the mark of finger-prints left by this unknown visitor on the freshly painted baluster rail when he leapt over into the court-

yard to escape. We were also unable to establish the identification of the dead man. That was strange enough, but an even stranger aspect of the case was that he had no right in the flat at all. It belonged to a lady at Brighton, who assured us that she had given no authority to anyone except the agent to enter the place. She retained one key, and the agent had another. They were keys for the front door, which was the only possible entrance to the flat.

“Such is the outline of a crime which caused a considerable sensation at the time. It was known as ‘The Chelsea Flat Case.’ There was much indignation in the newspaper press at the failure of Scotland Yard to lay hands on the murderer. One journal offered a substantial reward for information leading to the identity and capture of the man who came leaping down the stairs in the dark. But he was never arrested. He and his light overcoat disappeared as though they had never existed. Time went on; popular clamour died away, and ‘The Chelsea Flat Case’ passed into Scotland Yard’s list of unsolved mysteries. It was forgotten by most people—except myself.

“I’ve always hoped that sooner or later I’d unearth the man who outwitted that Chelsea police constable so neatly. He showed great coolness and resource at a trying moment. He had left a murdered man in an empty flat upstairs, and found a policeman waiting at the foot of the staircase to stop him. His escape was cut off, and he was apparently cornered. His appreciation of this situation and his daring plan to outwit the policeman had to be thought out on the spur of the moment while running from one flight of stairs to the next. He almost deserved to escape, because of his cleverness. Resource in crime is very rare, in my experience. As a

general rule English criminals have a very low order of intelligence. And resource is a quality which is rarely met with in the respectable middle class. Therefore I've always held the opinion that the light overcoat covered a visitor of unusual type, perhaps a young man of good family. I've waited for twelve years to put that theory to the test."

Luckraft ceased speaking. Robert raised his head and looked straight into his eyes. "Well?" was all he said, but Luckraft nodded comprehendingly. "There's more to come yet," he said. "I must explain the connection between the two sets of finger-prints."

"That is unnecessary," rejoined Robert. "I have no desire to know."

"I had better tell you, though. When I was brought down here by Colonel Glenluce I naturally gathered some information about yourself and your early life, and your abrupt departure from England twelve years before. You were supposed to be dead until you returned in equally abrupt fashion some few weeks before your father's death. In other eyes you were a figure submerged in mystery: regarded with awe, and perhaps a little fear—fear of the unknown. These strange episodes in your life set me pondering how a gentleman like yourself came to leave home and family and stay away for years. I could think of nothing to account for it save that you had done something in the first place which compelled you to leave the country. I was also led to the conclusion that this act, whatever it was, must have been of a grave nature to keep you away so long and cause you to hold no communication with your family, so that they came to the conclusion that you were dead. Why should a man like yourself, with apparently everything to live for, vanish off the earth in this mysterious fashion? Fear of the

law seemed to me the only possible explanation. I examined the official records of undiscovered crimes which corresponded with the period of your departure from your native land. The Chelsea Flat Case was the most important, and the circumstances of that crime pointed to no ordinary criminal. That gave me the clue. I compared the two sets of finger-prints. They were identical."

"Very interesting." Robert's voice was non-committal. "And now—what next?"

Luckraft held up a deprecating hand.

"Allow me to state what remains. I have dwelt on these points in detail because I had nothing to go upon in the beginning but surmise, and it was necessary to show you how I linked up two widely divergent sets of facts."

Robert looked at Luckraft in complete detachment. He was quite calm. Another blow had fallen. Fate had driven in its last nail.

"What do you intend to do?" he asked. "What is your object in coming to tell me this?"

Luckraft did not reply to the question. He seemed to be thinking. At length he said:

"I am informed that you are leaving England again, Sir Robert." He hesitated, then added with composure: "I see no necessity for that step."

Robert, looking up, interrupted sharply. "What do you mean?" he said.

Again, Luckraft did not reply immediately. He scrutinized Robert closely before uttering his next words.

"You left England twelve years ago to shield some one," he said.

"How did you learn that?" asked Robert, speaking in a very low voice.

Luckraft permitted himself a faint smile.

"It is our business to find out these things," he observed. "Such secrets are safe with us unless justice demands their disclosure. In your case that necessity does not arise. The secret which you have guarded for twelve years can remain a secret still. That is to say, names need not be disclosed. Listen to what I have still to say, and then decide. For twelve years you have lived under a cloud of your own making, and, if I mistake not, you are now doing the same thing again. There is a certain resemblance between the facts of Sir Roger's death and the case at Chelsea which caused you to leave England twelve years ago."

Robert sprang to his feet in excitement. "I don't understand you," he exclaimed.

"Sit down, and I will try and make it clear to you," rejoined Luckraft. "The resemblance is in one particular only. In the Chelsea case a man was murdered, but Sir Roger died from natural causes. But in both cases certain facts were carefully hidden to shield a woman, and in each instance the woman was shielded by yourself."

"What facts were concealed about my father's death?" Robert asked this question in a constrained voice.

"I think you could tell me that, or at least help me to discover them," was the cautious rejoinder.

"I have no idea what you mean. Are you suggesting that Sir Roger was murdered?"

"That was not my thought. But I believe that his body was carried from the house to the place where it was found."

Robert gave a start which did not escape Luckraft's eyes. Then he said:

"For what reason?"

"That I cannot even surmise," rejoined Luckraft candidly. "It is what I should like to discover. The matter

is a disquieting one. There are certain things which should be cleared up: certain doubts which require an answer. I cannot answer them. It is for you to choose, for I believe you know. If you are wise you will disclose them. If you are thinking of leaving England——”

“I cannot leave England now,” interrupted Robert, with a look of surprise.

“If you wish to there is nothing to prevent you,” said Luckraft, in a soft voice.

Robert looked at him angrily.

“Let there be an end to this,” he said disdainfully. “Are you trying to induce me to invent a story so as to help you round off a case? If so, you are wasting your time. Do you wish me to accompany you back to London?”

“No, no; you are quite mistaken.” Luckraft’s cold eyes rested on Robert’s face with a curious glance in which admiration seemed mingled with disappointment. “I thought that I understood a little about human nature, but I am not so sure now that I do.” He made this admission with another of his dim smiles. “There is still something remaining to be told about the Chelsea case, though I thought you would have guessed it from what I have already said. We know all about that murder case. The woman you shielded made a clean breast of it.”

These words seemed to reach Robert from a distance. He sat quite still.

“It was a death-bed confession, made three years ago,” continued Luckraft. “Let me relate it in the form of an hypothetical case, so as still to preserve that reticence regarding the persons concerned which has been observed for so long. Let us go back twelve years, and picture a young and beautiful woman, the wife of an army officer

in India, madly in love with a young man of some wealth and social position. The young man, it seems, was not aware that she was married. She was supposed to be a widow. They both moved in a pretty smart set and her charm for him was one which is easily exerted by a beautiful woman over a man younger than herself. Such an affair has its perils. In this case it took the customary course of stealthy passages and stolen meetings. Their meeting-places were carefully selected with an eye to secrecy. The flat was one of them. There was a third key. I'm not prepared to say whether the lady at Brighton was aware of its existence. She assured us positively that there were only two keys in existence, but women can lie with an infinitude of conviction when it suits them to do so. At any rate, it is clear now that the wife of the army officer was a friend of the Brighton woman, and knew that the flat was unoccupied. She may have had a key which fitted the lock. However, that point is immaterial, and has no bearing on the case, one way or another. What is to the purpose is that on this night, going to the flat by appointment, she was seen from a taxi by her husband, unexpectedly returned from India that day, and at that moment on his way to Cheyne Walk, where his wife resided. Life has such strange mischances, as we know.

“Apparently his suspicions were aroused at the sight of his wife hurrying along a wet deserted street on such a night, unattended, and on foot. He stopped his taxi, paid it off, and followed her to the unfrequented street where she was bound. From the road he watched her enter the courtyard, and go up the flight of stairs. It seems that he followed her silently, and when she entered the top flat he stood in the shadow of the little landing, waiting. In a few minutes the young man in the light

overcoat came up the stairs, and knocked lightly at the door. When it was opened by the woman the army officer slipped across the landing and followed them into the flat. As his wife turned to shut the door it was closed for her, and she saw her husband standing there. By the light she had just lit she saw something glittering in his hand. It was a revolver—his Service revolver.

“I do not suppose that he intended to use it. He may have intended to frighten them, or merely to safeguard himself. That’s something I shall never know, for at the sight of the weapon terror took possession of the woman—sheer, unreasoning terror. No doubt the shock of seeing her husband there, when she believed him to be thousands of miles away, helped to destroy her mental balance. Without a word she rushed on him swiftly, and attempted to drag the revolver from his grasp. He struggled to retain it. She declared that the shot which killed him was accidental. Again, I cannot say whether this is truth. But it is certain that a shot was fired by her, and that shot killed her husband. He stared at them both with a kind of whitening smile, and then crumpled up on the floor as though his bones had gone to wax. That was the manner in which his death was described to me.

“They discussed what they had better do. It was the woman’s idea for them both to leave the flat after removing from the body any papers which might have led to identification. When this had been done she left the flat first, and her companion remained behind until she got clear. As she pointed out, they dared not run the risk of being seen together. So he remained behind to cover her retreat, as it were: a course which nearly led to his own arrest, as we have seen.

“When the lady—still in a state of extreme terror—

saw him at his rooms in Half Moon Street next day, she urged him to go away, for a time at least. She made that suggestion from a motive of deep selfishness, but the young man had every reason to think that it was necessary for him to get out of England as quickly as possible. He believed that the policeman had seen him come downstairs on the previous night, and therefore his arrest was certain to follow, sooner or later. He left England, and stayed away, to avoid arrest for murder. He was not the type to clear himself at the expense of a woman who had loved him. He went into exile and stayed there, because his lips were sealed.

“The identity of the dead man was never known to us until this confession. He had left the army, and returned to England without announcing his intention to anyone, for reasons which he took to the grave with him. Perhaps one might make a guess at them, but it would be only a guess after all. At one time I’d have thought it strange for a man to vanish off the face of the earth without being missed, but after a man has been in Scotland Yard for a few years he loses the capacity for being surprised at anything on earth. The two persons principally affected by this man’s death could never have foreseen such a lucky chance, or they might have acted differently.”

He rose to his feet, hesitated, then added in a different voice:

“That is the story, Sir Robert. I am glad to be able to bring you this news.”

Robert sat there, in silence. When he lifted his head and looked up he was alone. It was impossible to guess his feelings at that moment. His face remained inscrutable as ever, schooled by the teaching of the years. Stretching forth his hand, he opened one of the drawers

of the bureau and drew forth the letter he had received from Kathleen on the island. As his eye scanned the faded lines he smiled a little, then he folded up the letter with a sigh. He had carried his dark burden for so long that loneliness still held him in a close grip. It was for Kathleen to say whether that grip was to be loosened, and if peace was to be his after all these years.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE GULF BETWEEN

FROM the terrace Kathleen walked across the lawn to where Robert was waiting for her by the sundial. He looked at her as she approached, conscious that she was changed.

"It was good of you to come, Lady Fibbets," he said.

She raised her dark eyes to his, but dropped them again before he was able to gain more than a glimpse of their sad and troubled depths.

"You wished to see me, Robert," she murmured.

"I did," he responded in a gentle voice. "I have something to say to you, Kathleen."

"Yes?" she said questioningly.

"Something which affects us both," he went on.

"Yes?" she echoed, this time somewhat timidly.

"I want to tell you why I left England twelve years ago," he began.

She had not expected this, and was correspondingly surprised.

"Why are you confiding in me?" she asked in a low and hurried tone.

He did not reply at once, but turned into a green vista opening off the garden path.

"Let us walk on," he said.

Kathleen walked beside him in silence until they reached the end of the garden. On the other side of the tall clipped hedge the trees of the little wood flared crimson in a funeral pyre of their own decay. Beyond the wood

the river gleamed, cold and grey. Robert pointed to a rustic seat, and they sat down. In this secluded spot he related his story to Kathleen.

He told her all that he thought it necessary for her to know in the fewest possible words. He mentioned no names, and left her intelligence to bridge portions of the narrative best left unspoken. Even at that moment he protected the memory of that unknown dead woman whom his silence had shielded so long. But his conscience, which had scourged him secretly and incessantly through the long years of his solitary self-communion, would not permit him to shield himself now that he was at last free to speak. In those lonely years he had taught himself to look into his heart with clear eyes, and at this supreme instant of his life he was his own merciless judge. He felt that his own share in that piece of tragic folly which had wrecked his life admitted of no palliation or excuse, but, altogether apart from that, it was better for Kathleen, if she loved him, to learn everything from now than turn to him, perhaps, in after years and say: "You did not tell me all."

So he spoke with his eyes fixed on the distant river, and Kathleen listened. She heard him throughout in constrained silence, for a reason he did not guess. They were at cross-purposes, in fact, and Kathleen was far from understanding him aright. She could not grasp the reason which had led him to talk to her thus, though she did realize that his confession was the outcome of an obviously painful effort. She was also able to judge the case he laid before her, and to see that he was condemning himself too severely. His solitary broodings over this thing had distorted his sense of proportion, Kathleen thought. With the degree of moral turpitude involved she was not particularly concerned. It was all so long

ago and remote. But her feminine judgment arraigned the woman as the principal offender throughout, as well as the criminal at the end. Robert had suffered and paid in full, but this woman he had shielded remained the chief sinner.

If this had been all, the girl's eager nature would have overflowed in sympathy for the man who sat beside her, telling her his story with halting tongue, and pain and sorrow in his voice. She would have turned to him with tender eyes, and generous hands outstretched, anger like a flame within her at the thought of this shameless treacherous member of her own sex who had sent him forth alone, like Ishmael, to bear the burden of her sin. If only this was all! But there was that unforgettable mystery of a recent night which thrust its formless shape between them like a cold shadow, chilling her warm girlish impulses, filling her with perplexity and pain.

He seemed surprised at her silence, and his attitude suggested the disappointment which he felt. He looked at her questioningly once or twice, but as she did not speak he went on, though with a visible effort:

"I can see that you blame me deeply."

"No, no! I do not—not for this." She added the last words in a lower tone. "You—you have been terribly punished. Why should I presume to blame you? Indeed you must believe me when I say so."

He was reassured by these words. He spoke again, but even more slowly:

"Thank you for saying that. Do you know why I have told you this, Kathleen?"

There was an inflection in his voice which she had never heard before. It disturbed her vaguely.

"No," she replied in an undertone.

"Because I love you, dear," he said softly.

His words came to her with a shock which was greater because of the maddening throb of joy in her treacherous heart. That joy was quickly extinguished by the memory of what she remembered.

"Oh," she cried, with a half-sob, "how can you say this to me!"

"I am sorry, Kathleen." His face was sad. "You are right of course. I might have guessed that what I have told you was too terrible for a girl like you to understand. But it was better for you to know it, before I asked you for your love."

"It is not that," she unsteadily replied. "I have said I do not blame you. How could I? But——"

"But you cannot love me? Is that what you were going to say?"

She let that question pass, and lifted shamed eyes to his face, forcing herself to explain.

"I know everything," she whispered.

He was slow in taking her meaning.

"Will you speak more plainly?" he said patiently. "What is it you know?"

"I know you met Stella that night."

"What night?"

"The night when Sir Roger disappeared."

He gave a slight start which did not escape her, but his voice was steady as he replied:

"Again, I am afraid I do not understand you."

"I think you do," she answered tremulously. "I saw Stella. I watched her go——" Her voice failed her.

"Go where?"

"Into your room."

"Where were you?" he asked in level tones.

"At the door of my room."

He appeared to reflect. "What else did you see?"

"I saw Sir Roger come up the stairs, turn into the corridor, and knock at your door."

"Anything else?" he said brusquely.

She looked at him with a little fear, and her eyes were bright with unshed tears.

"I do not wish to talk of this," she whispered. "It is too painful, too dreadful."

"We must speak of it," he bitterly rejoined. "You do not guess all this means to me. You are a modern girl, so I will speak plainly. You seem to have put the worst interpretation on what you saw."

"What other interpretation is possible?"

She spoke with a coldness which she was far from feeling. In the midst of the moral annihilation which enveloped them, her sinking heart still clung to the hope that he might be yet able to save them with some explanation which she could accept. Her girlish inexperience could not fathom his attitude, and her despairing prayer was that he might strive to make it clear. She waited.

"I cannot explain," he said in a dull voice.

He eyed her covertly, anxiously. Her heart died within her at his words, but she remained outwardly calm.

"If you cannot explain, had we not better terminate this painful interview?" was what she heard herself saying.

"A painful interview!" he echoed. "Yes; it is certainly that—to me. But as we have started this conversation we had better go on. At least let us try to understand one another before we part. I have told you that I love you. That is something which calls for a reply."

"Unless you can explain to me that I am wrong, I can only regard your love as an insult," she steadily replied.

"I will tell you the truth, whether you believe me or not," he rejoined with equal firmness. "I have told you

that I love you. I have always loved you, and I shall love you till I die. That, at least, is truth. Now I tell you that you are wrong in supposing what you did. And, again, that is the truth."

"What did it mean, then?" she asked a little breathlessly.

Before her earnest uplifted gaze his own glance fell.

"I cannot explain that," he rejoined sombrely. With a swift change of tone he continued: "Kathleen, do not ask me, but believe me and trust me. I have asked you for your love. Would I have dared to do so if my lips had been steeped in lies and deceit? No; for that would have been to risk too much. More than that, it would not have been worth while. Is it not possible for you to realize this? If this had been what you thought it to be—my guilt and my shame—I could never have spoken of love to you."

She looked at him with sorrowful eyes. In the eagerness of his appeal he had stretched a hand towards her, but dropped it again. She regarded his listless fingers attentively now, longing to clasp them. Her heart whispered to her: "Believe him, believe him; he is speaking truth." But the voice of that gentle advocate was stifled by the insistence of pride and reason. She looked at him again in weariness of spirit, trying to read his soul. But his face was inscrutable. Impossible to tell what lay behind that mask: candour and truth, or falsehood and deceit. There were two men within him, as she well knew. Which had spoken to her? Robert Lynngarth, whom she had known and trusted in her childhood's days, or the being who had wandered beyond her ken, to return scarred and hardened?

Again, her mind reverted to all she had seen, and a revulsion of feeling swept over her. She flushed swiftly,

then as quickly went pale. Trust him, believe him? Ah, that was impossible, when she thought of that night. She felt she could never believe in his love with that memory in her mind, sinister and unexplained. No, a thousand times no! A new and terrible suspicion shot through her brain that what she had witnessed that night was part of some hidden sequence of events in which his own complicity was best covered by silence.

Robert was watching her to see the effect of his words. He came closer.

"Kathleen!" he said.

She recoiled from him quickly, exclaiming:

"Do not come near me; do not touch me."

His face went white to the lips. She heard him say:

"I am not likely to touch you against your wish." His voice was lifeless. "You have given your answer. You do not believe me."

"If it were only a question of believing, I should have to ask myself what that belief covered," she said, after a pause.

"That is too subtle for me." He spoke sternly.

"It may be better for me to disbelieve what you have told me than to imagine something worse." She brought her suspicion into light of day with tremulous deliberation.

He puzzled over her words and grasped her meaning. He raised his head sharply.

"You have said enough." He spoke in an unmoved voice, without any trace of bitterness, but Kathleen had the strange idea that he was looking down at her from a height, from some dim lonely altitude where he dwelt alone. "I do not blame you—why should I? The circumstances are damning indeed. Who am I to expect that you should light the sacred lamp of faith for me?"

Believe me or not, but I have spoken as truth itself. These are my last words to you before I go."

"Go—go where?" she faltered.

"I shall go back to my island. My passage has not been cancelled, because I did not learn of this Chelsea confession until last night. Then I was foolish enough to hope that I might not have to go at all. I know better now. There is a steamer leaving Tilbury to-morrow, and I shall catch it."

"There is no need for you to go—because of me," said Kathleen faintly. "I can leave—leave Redways——"

He silenced her with a gentle gesture, as though she were a child.

"There is no need for that. I go to-morrow, as arranged. The island will be my sanctuary, as well as for the birds. There's the sea and the sky, solitary walks, a dog, and the birds. For the rest, there is peace—the peace of nature. . . . 'Night and day . . . sun, moon, and stars, all sweet things . . likewise a wind on the heath.' Do you remember 'Lavengro,' Kathleen?"

He paused, hesitated, and then went on:

"I should not have returned to England, and, indeed, a superstitious man might have hesitated to obey a summons brought by the dead. There may be something in such omens, and perhaps it is folly to disregard them. I had gained a measure of peace there. Well, I will go back and seek to regain it."

He came to an abrupt stop. His eyes had a far look in them, as if in imagination he saw the place of his thoughts: the island with glittering cliffs, the birds, the long line of sea, the open horizon where freedom dwelt. Kathleen looked at him in silence.

He raised his head and met her glance with a grave smile.

"I will not go until I have told you all my reasons for leaving the island," he said. "There is something I kept back. I did not realize how much it meant until I returned. You had something to do with my return."

"I—I do not understand," she faltered.

His answer was to take a folded letter from his pocket-book: a sheet of paper discoloured by sea-water and faded with age.

"This came from you, with the one from my mother," he said quietly. "You were a child when you wrote it, with the faith of a child."

She bent her head over the letter and read the childish scrawl. Her heart beat painfully. A tear splashed down on the paper. But he did not see that.

"I came back because one human being besides my mother believed in me," he went on sadly. "It seems I was mistaken in thinking so, as I have so often been mistaken during my life. As I said, Lady Fibbets, I do not blame you—why should I?—only, your unbelief brings home to me my folly in leaving the island. And now I go back."

He walked away quietly and left her alone, sitting with bent head looking down at the letter in her hands—a faded piece of paper on which tears were dropping fast.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE VALLEY OF DECISION

IN the end Kathleen acted on the spur of the moment after a sleepless night spent in reviewing that last talk. Reason endeavoured to reassure her by telling her that she had behaved as a self-respecting English girl should. But reason is a poor companion in grief, and Kathleen was young. By her act he was faring forth, to return no more. No more! In the unhappiness of that thought his weary eyes haunted her through the dark hours with the look which had crept into them when he had made his last appeal.

At dinner-time he had said good-bye to them all, because, he said, he had to catch a very early train, and he did not wish to bring them down from their rooms in the bleak dawn for the purpose of a leave-taking which might just as well be taken then. Lady Mercer, coldness hiding a bitterly grieved heart, had acquiesced in the wisdom of this. She remarked that at her time of life she could not rise at an unearthly hour because he chose to go rushing off to the end of the earth again. Lady Mercer looked as if she might have said a great deal more, but just then she gave a quick glance at Robert's face, compressed her lips, and was silent. The next moment she kissed him fondly and turned away, sailing up the great staircase with a brave front, which she kept up until her door closed behind her.

There remained Kathleen and Stella. Restraint held the three of them, and invested their good-byes with the

coldness of a brief and formal ceremony. The moment held awkward possibilities, and Kathleen guessed why Robert preferred to have it over then instead of the morning, when it might have been worse. The girl looked at him sadly, but Stella seemed almost indifferent. These farewells spoken, Robert left the room, and the two girls were alone. Stella sat there listlessly, but Kathleen rose to go to her room. She had no share in the other's thoughts, though she might have guessed them, and her own were unhappy enough. Which of them could face the future best without him? That was the thought in her mind as she mounted the stairs. Over the baluster her eyes watched the tall form of Robert going along the gleaming oak corridor to the Painted Room—for the last time.

He was going away. She wanted to be alone.

So it happened that Kathleen, lying wide-eyed at dawn, heard the crunch of wheels on the gravel outside. She slipped out of bed and went to the window. In the carriage drive before the terrace she could see the closed car which was to take him to the station. It was a black car, reminding her of a hearse, and, like a hearse, it was about to carry off everything she held dear in life. The chauffeur was making ready to start, whistling blithely—how could he whistle when her heart was broken? Robert's trunks were placed at the back and strapped securely. Everything was ready. Robert came forth with a light coat on his arm, accompanied by Jauncey. He shook hands with him. "Good-bye, Jauncey." His voice reached her, pleasant and clear, followed by the butler's deferential reply: "Good-bye, Sir Robert. My respectful wishes for a pleasant journey and a speedy return." Jauncey did not know he was not coming back. Only she knew that.

As he stepped into the car he shot one fleeting upward glance at her window. He could not see her, because the curtains hid her, but she flushed a little and drew hurriedly back. Then the car moved off with a heartless whirring on the gravel, and was quickly borne from her sight round a bend in the drive. The first stage of his long journey had begun; he had left the home of his fathers with none to see the last of him except a couple of sleepy and indifferent servitors now gaping at the half-open door.

His last glance had been at her window—not Stella's.

Stella's blind was drawn when Kathleen dressed and went down into the garden, where the swallows were flying high. The blind was still down when she went in to breakfast. Kathleen had the breakfast-room to herself that morning—to herself and her thoughts.

She was restless after the meal, and wandered from room to room of the deserted house. The portraits of generations of Lynngarths looked down upon her. She studied those faces of which only dim painted outlines remained. They had once lived, and had their share of happiness and pain, but had any one of them suffered such misery as she was feeling now? Life seemed very difficult, and hard to understand. Were not human beings born into the world to be happy? There was something in this grim indifference of the unknown gods which disconcerted her, and made her feel afraid.

Ten o'clock. The hour chimed in solemn measure from a clock near her. Robert's boat was due to leave Tilbury at five. She had ascertained that fact at the breakfast-table from the shipping columns of *The Times*. Until that hour he was still on English soil. Only seven hours, and the minutes nibbling away at them, like rats gnawing a piece of rope. Seven hours! No: less now. The min-

utes kept going with maddening persistence, for there was something vaguely comforting in the knowledge that he was still in England. The departure of the ship meant the irrevocable end and the final parting.

It was when the hour had reached eleven that the impulse to go to London came into her head. She did not know what put it there. Perhaps the empty rooms, with their memories of him, prompted the thought of catching a final glimpse of him before it was too late. But Kathleen did not reason about that. The idea came into her mind, and stayed there. She did not think of going after him to tell him she had changed her mind, to ask him to stay in England. No; with the longing of youth she wished merely to see him, from afar and unseen.

Excitement succeeded apathy. A flush crept into her cheeks. Dared she go—ought she to go? It was something to do, and would take her away from that silent house, even if she did not see him. At least there could be no harm in inquiring at the shipping office what time the boat train left London. That committed her to nothing. A moment later she was downstairs at the telephone. The answering ring to her trunk call came with astonishing quickness. She asked her question. A distant voice broke the perfect stillness with the information that the last boat train for the *Gerondia* left Fenchurch Street at 3.15. Kathleen restored the receiver to its hook. She knew there was a fast express from Winchester at 12.40, which reached Waterloo at ten minutes past two. Her watch pointed to half-past eleven. She had time to catch it, if she went at once.

“I’ll go,” she whispered.

It was something, indeed, this call for instant action, instead of sitting still watching the time slip away. Kathleen ran up to her room to get ready, and a few minutes

later was wheeling her bicycle down the carriage-drive. The car would have been quicker, but she wished no one to know of her journey. She had been bred decorously, and was quite excited by the daring of the escapade; at the thought of Lady Mercer's disapproval if she knew. She reached the station in good time, and found herself in an empty first-class compartment ten minutes before the departure of the train.

She had left Redways in emotional mood, with only a vague idea of what she was going to do in London, and her mind was not much clearer when the train reached Waterloo. She found herself engaging a taxicab and telling the driver to take her to Fenchurch Street. On the way down Fleet Street and up Ludgate Hill her plan took shape. At the station she would get a platform ticket, and she would then slip through and scan the train. Even if she didn't see Robert, she would at least see the train which was carrying him away. Such was her plan, perfected while the taxicab was held up in the traffic outside the Bank. Kathleen feared they might not get through in time, but the station clock pointed to three when they reached Fenchurch Street. A porter bought her a platform ticket, and pointed out the platform from where the boat train started.

Kathleen walked towards it, quickly at first, then more cautiously. She could see the train alongside the platform, a very long train, which was rapidly filling with passengers who kept arriving every minute in motor-cars and taxicabs. There was a great deal of bustle and confusion, with porters running about with luggage. For a moment Kathleen watched this scene from a distance. She felt she need not trouble herself seriously with the fear of being detected by Robert. There was such a multitude of people there. That reflection brought an-

other—was she likely to catch a glimpse of him? She had not foreseen a station packed with people about to leave England, and other people there to see them off.

The queue outside shortened. Kathleen drew nearer, and glanced over the barrier.

His face came into her vision quite unexpectedly, without any effort of search on her part. His tall figure was responsible for that. He was at the far end of the platform, talking to some one hidden by the crowd. Then the remnant at the barrier melted through, and she had a glimpse of his companion. It was Stella.

The train began to fill. As the crowd on the station thinned, Kathleen saw her more clearly, standing in the shadow of a pillar, looking up into Robert's face with wistful eyes. Her hands were clasped lightly in front of her, and she was very still. Robert was talking to her, and she appeared to be listening intently.

Kathleen fell back a little from the barrier. The exaltation which had brought her to London was succeeded by a feeling of dull apathy. At that moment she longed to be away from all that clamour and confusion, back in the calm seclusion of Redways. But she did not move. She remained where she was, her eyes fixed upon the forms of Robert and Stella. As she watched them her mind was at work. She told herself that she understood what it meant very well. There was nothing surprising in Stella's presence there. She had motored to Winchester and caught an early train to London. No doubt it had all been prearranged between her and Robert, and that was why she had seemed so indifferent when he had said good-bye to her last night. Now Stella had his last looks, his parting thoughts. What did that mean? Kathleen did not know—perhaps some state of affairs of which she was in ignorance. She felt humiliated, and ashamed

of herself for her fruitless journey. It would be better for her to go away. Yet she hesitated. She remained behind the barrier, watching them.

She heard a cry of "Stand clear!" from a man in uniform. The engine-driver looked out from the engine-cab, waiting for the signal to start. There was a slamming of doors, and the sound of a whistle. Kathleen saw Robert put out his hand to Stella, and she took it and clung to it as though she would never let go. The train began to move. Robert gently freed himself and sprang into his compartment. With a final tragic gesture Stella turned away without a backward glance, and was lost to Kathleen's sight.

Her own eyes were on the receding train. It moved out slowly, then with gathering speed. The end of the rearmost compartment grew smaller and smaller, and finally disappeared from her gaze.

Then she turned away, an unhappy girl, to go back to Redways.

CHAPTER XXIX

ON THE SAME DAY

IT was something to get back to the peace of Redways after that experience, even in the dark, and to a distracted and angry Lady Mercer. Kathleen needed comfort, but it was not to be denied that Lady Mercer had some right to be angry, even if Kathleen had been the sole cause. But it was more serious than that.

"My dear Kathleen, wherever have you been?" she exclaimed, as soon as the girl appeared.

"To London," was the reply.

"You too!" The eyes above the hooked nose flashed a piercing glance. "What took you there?"

"I went to do some shopping." Kathleen despised herself for the lie, but she was too overwrought to tell the truth and all that it entailed. That might come later, but not then.

"You might have told me, I think."

"Oh, what does it matter?" Kathleen exclaimed, a trifle hysterically.

Lady Mercer looked up at her face in some surprise. "Apparently nothing nowadays," was her dry comment. "Modern girls do as they like, it seems. However, you are back, but I've not the least idea what's become of Stella."

"Stella!" said Kathleen faintly.

"Yes. She went up to London also, it appears, and took the large car. She ordered it early and went off without letting a soul in the house know—not even her maid. It's most extraordinary."

Her words sounded angry, but she looked distressed. Kathleen reflected that Stella must have slipped downstairs and gone off in the car while she was upstairs trying to make up her mind to go by train. All things considered, there was an irony in the situation more bitter than tears. The girl mustered up courage to ask a question:

"How do you know she went to London?"

"Denton returned with the car an hour ago."

"Without Stella?"

"Without Stella," repeated Lady Mercer emphatically. She proceeded to give Kathleen further enlightenment. "Denton says they reached London about one o'clock, and her ladyship ordered him to drive her to Piccadilly Circus. She stopped the car at the Haymarket exit of the Piccadilly Tube, and told him to return to Redways, as she was visiting some friends. Denton asked her if the car was to be sent to meet any train at Winchester in the evening. Stella told him no, as she would not be returning that night. She had a dressing-case with her, it seems. So there was nothing else for Denton to do but drive back with the empty car."

Kathleen absorbed this piece of news in silence, considering it in all its bearings. Lady Mercer glanced at her downcast face, and spoke again, in a changed tone.

"The servants don't know what it means, but they're suspicious already. I can see that."

"Why should they be?" Kathleen spoke very carefully. "If Stella wishes to go to London for a few days——"

A sharp ejaculation from Lady Mercer stopped her. "Two or three days! Nonsense, I know better than that. It means——" She pulled herself up suddenly.

"What does it mean?" Kathleen spoke rather breathlessly.

Lady Mercer took another look at her, long and intent.

"It means she's gone for good!"

In her agitation Kathleen almost betrayed herself.

"Why—why should she go away?" she stammered.

"Why?" The great lady bounced out of her chair, in a towering passion. "You ask why? To bring further disgrace on this unhappy house!" She paced angrily about the room. "I know it; I have suspected it all along. She has gone with——"

She stopped on the verge of uttering the name which was in both their minds, checked herself with a faint flush on her withered cheeks. But she got her temper in hand too late. Kathleen looked at her.

"I know what you were going to say," she said.

"I meant nothing," murmured Lady Mercer, inwardly condemning her impetuosity.

"You did," the girl insisted, in a low tone. "You think Stella has gone away with Robert."

Lady Mercer looked distressed.

"My dear," she said, "I did not say so."

"You thought it," returned the girl.

"It is not a matter I care to discuss with you, Kathleen."

"That means you do think so," exclaimed Kathleen, scanning her face. Her breath came quicker and her eyes brightened with excitement. "Why should you?"

"My dear," began the old lady again, actually quailing before Kathleen's glance. "Do not let us talk of this. After all, we do not know——"

"No, we only slander," broke in Kathleen passionately. "Oh, we women are all alike, without compunction or charity where our own sex are concerned. You have just said that Stella has left Redways for good."

"It looks like it."

"I believe she has too."

Lady Mercer looked startled. Kathleen went on:

"If she has gone, it is not as you suggest."

"What do you know about it?" asked Lady Mercer in a strange voice.

Kathleen looked at her with stormy eyes. She was strongly tempted to tell the truth.

"I know you are wrong."

"You had better tell me why you think so," remarked Lady Mercer quietly.

"I saw Stella saying good-bye to Robert."

"Where was this?"

"At the station in London."

"Were you there too?"

"No; I was at the barrier outside. But I saw them plainly. At the last moment, just as the train was moving off, Robert jumped into the carriage."

"Leaving Stella on the platform?"

"Yes."

"What became of her?"

"I don't know. I lost sight of her among the crowd on the platform."

Lady Mercer looked suspicious. "Perhaps there was another boat train."

"It was the last, and it was their final parting. I could see that——"

Kathleen faltered, palpitating and on the verge of tears. Lady Mercer seemed heartless to her with her interminable questions. But Lady Mercer was far from heartless. She had begun by now to have more than an inkling of the true situation, and she marvelled at her own past blindness. She ceased her questions. Kathleen's eyes as well as her words had taught her something. She pondered deeply. She was amazed at this new turn of

events, and very worried, not about Kathleen, but Stella. Certainly matters could not be allowed to remain at that, but she did not know what she ought to do. The morning might bring news.

It did, in the shape of a few lines from Stella, saying that she had decided to leave Redways for a while, and would write again when she was more settled. The newspaper bore the stamp of a hotel in Piccadilly where she had once stayed with Sir Roger. That was satisfactory as far as it went, but it left Lady Mercer more puzzled than ever. To go off like this, without a word, and to leave such a place as Redways! Vainly Lady Mercer tried to imagine the reason. Kathleen, a girl herself, and in love, partly guessed it, but Lady Mercer was neither a girl nor in love. She sought for precedent for such an action in the memories of a long life, but found none. It was highly improper and inconsiderate behaviour on Stella's part. As Sir Roger's widow her place was at Redways, especially with Robert away. There could be no doubt of that. Such an extraordinary thing to do! Lady Mercer felt that modern womanhood was indeed beyond her. Here was Kathleen, too, of all girls, running up to London in this way.

These reflections occurred in her mind at the breakfast-table—a very late one, by the way—and on this morning she had found Kathleen at her lonely meal. The girl sat gravely in her place, with lowered eyes. Lady Mercer turned her glasses on Stella's letter again, lying open beside her plate. It seemed to give her an idea.

“My dear,” she broke out, “we had better go up to London and look into this.”

Kathleen assented to that proposal with an apathy which perhaps reflected the state of her feelings. They went up by train, and Lady Mercer passed the time in

picturing a repentant Stella, brought to a sense of duty by reason, returning with her to Redways in the evening. Alas, for such hopes! A clerk at the hotel informed the dismayed lady that Lady Lynngarth had left the hotel immediately after breakfast, carrying her dressing-case. The idea of a titled lady leaving the hotel on foot seemed to pain the clerk to relate, and the incident was not without its effect on Lady Mercer. She asked had Lady Lynngarth left no address to which letters could be forwarded? The clerk's answer was a suave negative. He added that the commissionaire had called a taxi for Lady Lynngarth, but she preferred to walk. Lady Mercer and Kathleen exchanged glances. The reason was plain to both of them.

"We must go and see Colonel Glenluce," said Lady Mercer, when they were outside again.

Kathleen demurred. "His time must be valuable," she said, "and we have taken up such a lot of it lately."

This idea provoked a smile from Lady Mercer. "We will chance that," she said. "My dear, what's the sense of having friends in high positions unless one makes use of them? That's what they're there for. Colonel Glenluce is just the man to help us find Stella. He has all Scotland Yard at his beck and call. He has only to lift his finger, and the thing is done."

Colonel Glenluce received them with courtesy, and did not seem to mind in the least the intrusion on his valuable time. They were ushered into his office immediately, without any waiting. It was a large and comfortable room, and Glenluce sat at a large table covered with speaking tubes and telephones. He came forward to greet them, shook hands, seated them in comfortable chairs, then composed himself in a grave listening attitude as Lady Mercer poured out her tale. When it was finished he

asked her a few questions, which Lady Mercer answered to the best of her ability. She had Stella's letter with her, and showed it to him. She had evidently acted on the spur of the moment, as she had taken very few clothes, according to her maid. No; she had no friends in London, so far as Lady Mercer knew; certainly none she could stay with in this unceremonious fashion. Money? Lady Mercer shrugged her shoulders. Stella had her own private banking account. She named the bank, and Glenluce made a note of it. She had a habit, too, of carrying a number of bank-notes in her handbag, so they need be under no concern on that account.

These questions answered, Lady Mercer looked Colonel Glenluce in the face.

"And now," she said, "what do you suggest doing?"

Glenluce appeared perturbed. "Lady Lynngarth is her own mistress, you know. Her actions cannot be called in question because she chooses to leave Redways."

"I know that," responded Lady Mercer. "But as Sir Roger's widow she has certain duties and responsibilities. She cannot simply run off in this fashion without letting us know where she is. There is the question of the will and the estate, and things like that. It will lead to all sorts of complications—legal and otherwise—if she vanishes like this and leaves us in the dark."

"Lady Lynngarth ought to let you know where she is," he replied. "I think you are justified in taking some action to find her if she does not communicate with you."

"I want her found at once," said Lady Mercer, with emphasis. "Can't you help us?"

"I don't know what we can do—in the open," was his cautious response. "Of course you wish to avoid publicity." Lady Mercer nodded emphatically. "In any

case, we are in a position of delicacy—extremely so. Legally, Lady Lynngarth is completely mistress of her own actions. On your side the position is also awkward. It is necessary that she should be found without delay. I may say that I don't quite know what I can do. I could, if you wish, have some guarded inquiries made——”

Lady Mercer caught eagerly at the word. “The very thing!” she exclaimed. “We must avoid scandal as far as possible, but people are sure to talk in any case. We shall be asked where Stella is, and what are we to say?”

“You can say she is staying with friends.”

“I thought of that, but if she does not return?”

“Leave this in my hands,” he replied reassuringly. “I will endeavour to find her for you. That is the first thing. And now forget all about it for the present, and let me take you out and give you some tea.”

They had tea, and he saw them off from Waterloo afterwards, standing on the station and smiling after them till the train carried them away. “A gentleman and our best friend,” said the older lady to Kathleen, as she waved her hand in farewell. “A rare type nowadays; more's the pity,” she added, settling herself comfortably in her corner seat for a nap. “He has resources too. That's the best of a good official position. He'll find Stella quickly enough. What a comfort to know such a man.” She nodded complacently, and closed her eyes.

Glenluce, returning to his office, was not quite so sure. On the way there, and later that night, he paid unspoken tribute to Lady Mercer's sagacity as displayed during his recent visit to Redways. It was true she had subsequently retracted her words, but Stella's departure from Redways on the day that Robert Lynngarth left England now invested them with a fresh significance too great to be over-

looked. He glimpsed something tragic beneath all this, though he had no idea what it was.

His promise was not forgotten. Next morning he sent for Chief Inspector Luckraft. Lady Mercer's news had had the additional effect of reviving his faith in that excellent officer. Perhaps, in this queer tangle of events, Luckraft had been right after all. Certainly, some things had happened at Redways which the recent inquiry had not disclosed, and possibly Luckraft had divined aright. Glenluce's first testimony of his renewed faith in the renowned subordinate was to place in his hands the task of finding where Lady Lynngarth had gone to.

"I rely on your perfect discretion in this matter, Luckraft," he murmured. "You will please regard what I have imparted to you as confidential, and your investigations also. They are not to be disclosed to your colleagues. Report to me personally, in this office, every evening."

Luckraft, his eyes fixed upon the carpet at his feet, assured him that his secretiveness was to be entirely relied upon. That assurance covered more than Glenluce knew. Luckraft had listened with intense interest to his confidence, and had pricked up his ears at the news (which Glenluce had deemed it necessary to disclose) that Lady Lynngarth's flight from Redways coincided with Sir Robert Lynngarth's departure from England. The zealous officer had appeared in the presence of his superior prepared to tell him of his own visit to Redways two nights before, and what had taken him there. But, as the master of Redways had left England in spite of that, Luckraft decided to keep the information to himself for the present, as he was not quite sure how Colonel Glenluce might regard his action. He wanted a free hand in the search for Lady Lynngarth, not only for the purpose of

reaching the end of a mystery which had puzzled him, but in order to prove to his departmental head that he had rebuked him improperly over the case. That rebuke still rankled in his breast, for Chief Inspector Luckraft had a sensitive soul, despite his man-hunting instincts. So he gladly seized the opening offered him to make further investigation, and left Glenluce to set about his task without delay.

But the days passed, and brought no news. The resourceful officer, making his nightly reports, had to confess himself at fault. He could find no clue. Lady Lynngarth had simply walked out of a London hotel and disappeared.

At Redways Lady Mercer and Kathleen were still alone in the old house, and December had reached its blackest mood, when the news came that Stella had been found.

Kathleen, returning from a walk in the afternoon, was met by Lady Mercer in the hall with an open letter from Glenluce in her hand. She kissed the girl and told her.

"Colonel Glenluce gives no details," she added. "He merely says that he will be down by the first train in the morning to tell us all about it."

Kathleen was silent. She did not dream then that the story Colonel Glenluce had to tell was to start her on a journey of many thousand miles across the world in the effort to right a grievous wrong.

CHAPTER XXX

STELLA

AFTER all, the guarded inquiries had proved unnecessary. A further letter which Stella wrote to the family solicitor after the lapse of a week or so removed anxiety on that score. Mr. Baron was the legal guardian of her late husband's worldly affairs, and these naturally required much adjustment under the new order. It was essential (from the point of view of the law) that Mr. Baron should be in touch with the principal beneficiary, and Stella's letter might be looked upon as a prudent recognition of the law's demands. Mr. Baron, to be sure, so regarded it. Then there was an interview between solicitor and client of which Glenluce was also unaware until Mr. Baron saw fit to make mention of it, and the letter, in a confidential sort of way, to the executor of the late baronet's estate.

In that capacity Colonel Glenluce asked for the favour of Lady Lynngarth's address for the ladies at Redways. Mr. Baron deeply regretted that he was not at liberty to disclose it. For the present Lady Lynngarth wished to remain in seclusion and entire change of surroundings until she had recovered from her recent sad loss. That was how Mr. Baron understood her desire, and the heart of his legal bosom evidently sympathized with it, for there was sentiment in his glance as he spoke. Glenluce asked if Lady Lynngarth was in London. Mr. Baron, joining the tips of his fingers together, and looking at the anxious gentleman over the top of them with a non-

committal legal face, answered with an air of extreme caution that for the present Lady Lynngarth was staying in the—er—metropolis. Beyond that he could not go. And with that Glenluce had to be content.

This knowledge came to him after Luckraft had searched high and low for Stella. Glenluce stopped the search immediately. It was an indignity for a woman in Stella's position, though at the same time the reasons for her action remained an utter mystery to him. What he knew of women and their ways was confined to the conventional type, who stuck to the beaten track. Stella's behaviour was so unusual that he could not guess what it meant. As Sir Roger's executor he felt in a measure responsible for his widow, and he was ill-satisfied with the situation as it stood. Stella might have remained in the peace and protection of a wonderful home, in spacious contentment, surrounded by the treasures which the Lynngarths had amassed. In imagination he saw her there, her fair head crowned with the dignity of a sorrow not altogether hopeless.

Instead, she had gone away, sacrificing her social position as mistress of Redways for an obscure existence in London, a place where humanity was reduced to the insignificance of insects by the sheer force of numbers. He did not like to think of Stella thus. She was a personality, a being of gracious charm, and the most beautiful thing he had known. She occupied his mind and heart in those days. He spent lonely evenings in his flat overlooking Green Park, thinking about her, over a solitary cigar, and wondering where she had hidden herself. If she had left England he could have understood it better. Robert Lynngarth had gone, but she remained. They had parted at Fenchurch Street. What did it mean?

Glenluce could not guess. His bewilderment was summed up in a half-spoken thought.

"I do not understand it at all."

He did not like it. The outcome of the disturbing thoughts which agitated him was that he decided to write a letter to her. That cost him more anxious thought. He said nothing about her departure from Redways. In formal terms, as the appointed guardian of her worldly interests, and also (this was a happy inspiration) as a friend of Sir Robert Lynngarth's, he assured her that his services were at her disposal any time she might be in need of them. He hesitated over the wording of the last phrase, but finally let it stand. He hesitated again over the signature, then signed "very sincerely yours," with his name, Philip Glenluce. The result did not please him. He thought it stiff, as perhaps it was, but it was kinder than he knew. Although he did not guess it then, he had used the most potent appeal he could have made to Stella.

The letter written, it was sent to Mr. Baron under cover, with the compliments of Colonel Glenluce, coupled with the request that it be forwarded to Lady Lynngarth without delay. There was no reply, though Glenluce hardly expected one. It seemed as though Stella was determined to guard her secret, whatever it was, by silence. Afterwards he learnt that his letter had reached her and touched her, and, in the long run, led her to send for him when she received that strange warning which her love interpreted aright. But more than two months passed before that moment came—two months in which she gave no sign. Through that period Glenluce waited, vaguely expectant, and at Redways Kathleen and Lady Mercer waited also.

December came in with rain and wind, and two weeks of a bleak month slipped away. Glenluce had promised Lady Mercer to spend Christmas at Redways, and the time for his visit drew near.

It chanced one evening that he had dressed to dine out when the telephone in his study rang. He went to it, and some one asked for Colonel Glenluce in a voice so remote that it sounded like a person speaking from another planet. Then the name of Lady Lynngarth, dropped, as it were, from a great height, startled him into a painful anxiety to understand the message. He gathered at length that the speaker was the matron of a nursing home in South Kensington where Lady Lynngarth was. Lady Lynngarth would like to see Colonel Glenluce. Would Colonel Glenluce make an appointment. At once? That was very kind. Lady Lynngarth would be pleased.

Glenluce wasted no time on unnecessary questions. Stella wanted him, and that was enough. He would have obeyed her summons if it had come from the other end of the world. A taxi had just been brought to the door by his servant for his dinner engagement, and Glenluce gave him the address of the nursing home.

As he drove there his mind was assailed with forebodings. Stella ill, and in a nursing home! What did it mean? He had not waited to ask. Perhaps she was very ill, dying. . . .

He endeavoured to shake off these dark thoughts, but they remained with him until they reached the home, a large house of handsome externals, in a quiet street near South Kensington Station. A porter opened the door of the taxi and ushered him in. There was no delay. The matron hastened downstairs to meet him. She was tall and portly, and had been handsome. A woman of

refinement obviously. She met his anxious inquiries with calming assurances. No; Lady Lynngarth was not seriously ill, but she was run down, and kept her room. The doctors (there had been a specialist) were agreed that her constitution was not strong, but there was nothing organic. Sir James Purdwell was attending her. She had come to the nursing home a week ago, on his advice. Symptoms? Only a slight cough, and occasional fatigue and listlessness. She was highly strung and perhaps a little fragile, and the cold winds seemed to try her. Sir James thought a warmer climate would be better for her lungs in the winter. Not yet, though—a little later on. He wanted to build up her strength first.

With these reassuring words the matron took Glenluce up a handsomely carpeted staircase to a room on the first floor, where she knocked.

“Come in,” said a voice which made Glenluce’s heart beat a little faster.

They went in.

“Colonel Glenluce, Lady Lynngarth,” said the matron with a smile, and turned away and left them alone.

He had expected to find her in bed, but she was lying on a couch in a rest gown, her fair hair loose and tied with ribbon, like a child’s. Like a child she looked to Glenluce, on the big couch, rather pale and ethereal perhaps, but beautiful as ever, recalling a remote and happier vision of herself as he remembered her, shortly after her marriage. He had expected to find her very ill, and the relief was great. Gently he took the hand she held out to him, then sat down beside her.

“It was kind of you to come so quickly,” she said with a smile—the tremulous ghost of her former smile.

“You wanted me,” he replied simply.

"Yes," she said. "I wish to tell you something—before it is too late."

He moved uneasily in his chair, doubtful what these words meant.

"I lie here, and think, and think." She clasped her hands despairingly, and looked at him with eyes of entreaty. "It is about Robert. I fear for him. He has gone away—back to his wretched lonely life—through me."

"Do not talk thus, Lady Lynngarth," he admonished.

But she went on as if she had not heard him:

"I should have stopped him. When I saw him off at the station he told me that the thing which had driven him from England twelve years ago no longer existed. In spite of that I let him go. But I did not see everything so clearly then."

She broke off in agitation. Glenluce kept silence.

"He is Lynngarth of Redways. His place is at Redways. Redways is his—his."

"I wished him to stay," he said simply.

She looked at him with misty eyes.

"I know," she whispered. "You were kind and good, and tried to help him. He told me. But it was not what you think that took him away—not at the last. He went away because he would not tell—about me. After he had gone, when I had time to think, that came to me more clearly, and I wondered what I ought to do. At first I thought of going back to Redways and telling Lady Mercer, but I could not. Then I got a cold, and it made me so tired and stupid that I didn't seem to care what happened. I was ill, I think."

She looked ill at that moment. Glenluce's eyes rested on her sympathetically. She moved restlessly.

"When I got better my thoughts came back. I could

not endure them. I was here, alone, with nothing to do but think. So I asked them to send for you. I had your letter, you know. Will you hear what I have to tell you? You have time—time to listen, I mean? For it will take me a long while to tell you all.”

“You had better not talk too much, or excite yourself until you are better.”

“I must!” The words came from her suddenly. “He has lost twelve years of his life. Besides, I have another fear——”

She sank back, covering her face. Regaining her composure, she looked at him with calmer eyes.

“Do you believe in presentiments, Colonel Glenluce?”

“Sometimes,” he said slowly.

“I have a presentiment about Robert. It haunts me.” She shivered a little. “You must help me to help him. I want him to be happy.” Her lips quivered. “He has done so much for me, and he has been wronged all through. Will you listen to me, please? Closer—come closer still.”

He obeyed, bending his head over her upturned face. From her cloud of scented hair she looked at him rather wistfully.

“I must begin a long way back.”

Glenluce nodded gently. She hesitated a little, breathing fast.

“I knew Robert years ago—not as Robert Lynngarth, but as James Raymond. It was in a distant country.”

Glenluce, grave and still beside her, knew she was strung up to what she conceived to be the duty of unveiling her heart’s secret at the eleventh hour. The room was very quiet, but the murmur of the traffic in the street below reached them from the window like the stirring of a distant wind.

Hurriedly at first, in a voice barely above a whisper, but growing stronger and clearer as she proceeded, Stella began her story. It concerned three people: herself, Robert Lynngarth, and another man whom she called Marist. If she spoke little of Marist, it was because of her evident overpowering fear of him; not because he did not enter into her story so prominently. He was there, all the time, a menacing and threatening shape; in deep shadow perhaps, but more to be feared on that account.

The parts played by the three were inextricably interwoven; afar at the outset, then nearer home. They were each involved in the narrative from first to last, but in retrospection Robert Lynngarth stood out, or James Raymond, as she then knew him. He filled the distant stage where the tangle of events began, a wonderful and chivalrous figure in her eyes, appearing by magic in a far-off spot to rescue her. She did not make so clear how she came to be there, and in the predicament in which Robert Lynngarth found her. Much of that part of her story she left for Glenluce to surmise—for his intelligence to understand.

It began, as she said, in a distant land; a remote country of which English people and the world at large knew very little, though the British flag floated over its sun-dried plains. The first act of the drama was set at a place called Dawnia, a straggling inland town five hundred miles from the coast, in the midst of thinly wooded hills, on the banks of a sluggish river which wound round the town like a yellow snake trying to strangle it out of existence. The place stood out in her memory. It was the terminus of the railway line with the coast. Beyond it was solitude and the unknown.

Here she first met the man she knew as James Raymond. He seemed to have had no particular business in

Dawnia. His turning up there was merely an incident in a life of purposeless wandering he had led since leaving England six years before, drifting into all sorts of strange out-of-the-way places as chance took him. But this time he happened to be in funds, with several hundred pounds in his pocket put there by a lucky lottery ticket which he had bought on the coast only the week before. Dawnia offered opportunities for getting rid of this money. It was race week, and visitors from the surrounding country-side had flocked in for the races. James Raymond was one of them. He put up at the leading hotel, full of bookmakers and racing men, who played billiards until far into the night, disturbing the peace of the solitudes with the popping of corks, loud laughter, and interminable talk of horses until night paled in the hills and the first sad streaks of dawn appeared.

One night of enforced association with this kind of thing seemed to have been more than enough for James Raymond. His temperament was solitary, and not convivial. Drinking, hilarity, and horse-racing held little attraction for him. Directly after dinner on the second night he left the hotel to take a stroll through the town in the warm evening air.

There were amusements in the place, drawn thither for the races. These consisted of a circus under canvas, a cinema, and a theatrical company appearing in a hall which did duty for a theatre when travelling companies visited Dawnia. James Raymond, wandering idly along the principal street on this sultry summer evening, paused to peruse the playbills displayed at the doors of these different attractions. He passed the picture palace and the canvas tent, but stopped at the brightly lit entrance to the theatre, where a bill announced that "The Blue Bats" were to give an entertainment within. James Ray-

mond had no particular wish to see "The Blue Bats," but time was hanging heavy on his hands, so he bought a ticket and went in.

"The Blue Bats" were announced on the programme as a company "fresh from a triumphant tour of the Eastern cities," but they failed to please James Raymond. The show struck him as a very poor one, and he was about to leave in disgust when the "star" turn came on. He decided to wait for it.

The turn, it appeared, was an Eastern dance, in which Monsieur Marist and Mademoiselle Chauve-Souris, the famous classical dancers, appeared respectively in the parts of "Le Tigre" and "The Flitter-mouse." So ran the programme. James Raymond, sitting alone in the front row of stalls, was observed to smile faintly as he lifted his eyes from the programme to fix them on the stage.

In keeping with his supposed part, Marist wore a tiger's skin, complete, with a ferocious head which concealed his features from the audience. The girl dancer also wore a hood with ears, but her face was visible. The man was the principal performer, and did most of the work. He was an excellent dancer—a Russian trained in the continental school—and his feline imitation was so realistic that the spectator in the front row found it difficult to believe that it was not some great cat which prowled and sprang about the darkened stage in pursuit of the flitter-mouse. He said afterwards that it required a strong effort on his part to sit still and watch the striped form leaping at his dancing partner. The girl's part was to dance just out of the tiger's reach. The stage effects were well managed. Marist knew his business thoroughly, and heightened the effect of the bizarre dance with music equally weird.

Apart from the empty front row of stalls, there was a good house that night, and Marist was pleased to prolong the dance beyond its usual limits. At last it was over, to James Raymond's relief, and the lights were turned up. At that moment he first saw the girl dancer's face distinctly. Across the footlights their eyes met.

He was struck by the expression of her look. She was lying near the front of the stage, not far from where he was sitting, with the male dancer standing over her to form an effective finale or stage picture. Across the intervening space her eyes sought and held his own with a gaze which penetrated into his very soul. Into the mind of the man who called himself James Raymond leaped the strange notion that her glance conveyed to his manhood some poignant unspoken appeal for help. He cursed himself for a romantic fool, but the idea remained. Then the curtain dropped, and hid the girl from view. James Raymond rose to his feet and left the hall, still haunted by that look.

"He told me all this—afterwards," said Stella softly, and for the first time Glenluce realized that the girl dancer of that bygone night was herself.

CHAPTER XXXI

A KNIGHT-ERRANT OF DAWNIA

“**Y**ES; he told me later what his thoughts were,” she went on softly, “but I partly guessed them as our eyes met. It is long ago now, but still vivid in my mind: that night, and afterwards.”

A sigh passed her lips. She was silent, and Glenluce had nothing to say. In a flash Stella had shown him the depth of her feeling for the man she had first known as James Raymond, telling her story in a manner which was a revelation of the completeness of her absorption in him. She pictured that distant first meeting through his eyes, like one repeating a story which did not concern her, as if he counted for all and she for nothing. And, indeed, he was everything to her. The miracle of her love shone in her eyes now, filling them with light.

Now she spoke of her own impressions of that first recontre because it seemed necessary to explain them. His look across the footlights that night had thrilled her. She read many things into it: kindness, regret, and an infinite pity. His eyes, as she hesitatingly expressed it, searched her soul. She left the theatre to pass a sleepless night, with those wonderful eyes looking at her in the darkness of her room. She spent the next day wondering if he would be at the performance in the evening. But he did not come. She scanned the theatre eagerly, thinking he might be in some other part of the house, but he was not there.

She danced badly that night. Her dancing partner

was very angry with her when the curtain fell, and subsequently. Marist had a savage temper, and he never allowed her to forget that she was in his power. Stella slurred over this part of her story, but her listener gathered that she was completely dominated by the man who danced as a tiger, and went in deadly fear of him. On this night his behaviour was so cruel and outrageous that she fled from him in terror, running out of the hotel—it was not the one where James Raymond was staying—down the broad veranda steps into the empty uneven street which curved white before her in the shadow of the sleeping night.

With one backward look at the veranda she ran down the street. It was moonlight, and the white, lonely road stretched before her eyes for a great distance. It took her beyond the scattered houses of the town, out into the primeval solitude of the bush. She went on and on, not knowing where she ran, the road unwinding its length before her like an endless ribbon.

Ultimately she reached a bridge spanning the river; a gaunt skeleton of steel and iron which cast a fretwork of shadows across her path. As she crossed it her shoes clicked sharply on its trellised surface, and she could see the water gleaming, dark and mysterious, far beneath. On the other side she paused, breathless, to recover her breath. She had run far, and she did not know where she was.

By this time she was very frightened, and wished herself safe back at the hotel. The spot was lonesome, and lapped in an intense stillness which gripped her senses with fear. After a while she seemed to hear strange rustlings in the trees, and once the silence was broken by a faint splash in the river beneath her. She was trying to summon up courage to retrace her steps, when

her eyes fell on the figure of a man coming rapidly across the bridge towards her.

At that unexpected sight her nerves failed her altogether. Blind with terror, she plunged down through the undergrowth which lined the deep sloping bank of the river, until she was pulled up by oozing mud and the murmur of water. Here she crouched in a fringe of stunted trees on the brink, the shadowy bank above her, the river slipping noiselessly past her feet.

How long she was there she did not know. Probably not more than a minute or two, though it seemed much longer. Then she saw a man's form emerge from the undergrowth near her, and make straight for the group of trees where she was crouching. The moonlight fell full on his face and she recognized him—recognized him with profound astonishment and a wildly beating heart. She knew him at once for the man who had been in the front row of the theatre on the previous night.

He advanced and spoke to her, and it seemed quite natural that he should. She was not afraid of him—not a bit—any more than she felt surprise at his having followed her there. She listened to his explanation in silence. He had been out for a stroll in the moonlight, and was sitting resting in the shadow of the bridge when he saw a woman's figure flitting towards him. She passed so close to him that he could have touched her, and he recognized the girl he had seen dancing at the theatre. A distraught girl running at full speed at night along a deserted road was a spectacle which put meditation to flight. He got up and looked after her, watched her to the other side of the bridge, and saw her clamber down the steep bank towards the water. Then he came after her.

She assured him in a whisper that he was mistaken.

It was not as he supposed. She had not gone there to drown herself. He looked at her doubtfully, and asked what had brought her running to such a spot at a time when all girls should be asleep, dreaming happy dreams. She attempted to reply, but began to cry instead. He was sympathetic and gentle. He let her have her cry out, and then asked her what her trouble was, and if he could help her in any way. She shook her head, but he looked at her in the moonlight—she could always see that look when she thought of him—then said quietly that he had thought of her more than once since last night, and believed that she was unhappy and in distress. Coming across her again, thus, made him feel responsible for her, in a way, so she had better tell him what was wrong.

His manner of speaking was compelling—fascinatingly so—but at first she hesitated. Not because she feared to confide in him—oh, no! For other, quite different reasons. But her loneliness and misery overcame her reticence. At heart she wished to tell him. There was something about him which stirred her feelings and impelled her complete trust. She was quite friendless, and as lonely and unhappy a girl as that great strange land contained. The hour and the situation brought them closer to each other, and her feminine perception told her that he was not like other men. These things helped to break down the barriers in her mind. She found herself telling him all about herself and her life.

She told her story hurriedly, assuming a composure she did not feel, standing beside him at the brink of the river which slipped past them stealthily as a snake. They had left the fringe of trees, and stood in an open space where the moonlight revealed them and their two faces: hers tearful, his intent and listening, looking at

her from time to time with eyes sad and troubled as her own, but kind and gentle beyond belief.

She was in that mood when a woman gives herself away utterly to a sympathetic listener. Hers was the chronicle of a girl who had strayed outside the high wall of convention, and could not get back into the enclosure. The distance from beginning life as the daughter of a Devon curate to the predicament in which she found herself that night is not so great, once the first step is conceded. In Stella's case a soft and yielding disposition and the glamour of the stage appeared to have been the predisposing causes. Against her father's advice she had left home to go on the stage. Her youth and good looks gained her a part in a company leaving England to play in South Africa. Soon after they arrived there she made the discovery that her histrionic ability was of less importance in the eyes of the manager than her womanhood. She resisted his advances, as she had been virtuously brought up, but she did not leave the company on that account. She had no money, and nowhere to go. The company went on tour in the interior, and became stranded. She found herself alone and friendless in an unknown land.

She managed to make her way back to the coast, and it was there she met Marist, the Russian dancer, with whom James Raymond found her. With him she travelled far, ultimately reaching the land of sun-dried plains. From the first Marist seemed to have gained the strongest sort of influence over her: an evil domination based largely on the terror he inspired in her. He formed a touring company, and engaged and trained her to dance in the act with himself. It was very successful at first, and proved the leading attraction wherever they played. After a while she grew to dislike Marist and weary of

her bondage (it soon came to be that), but did not know how to end it. How the Russian came to acquire such domination over her she did not say. He loved her, it appeared, in a jealous fierce-eyed way, but she vowed that she had never felt any love for him—only fear. She submitted to his terrorizing sway because of that, and also, perhaps, because she was of the type unable to fend for herself. Marist had taught her all she knew of the stage, and she was, in a sense, dependent upon him, much as she feared him and wanted to leave him. That required more nerve than she possessed. Her earlier embittering experience had taught her the difficulty of obtaining theatrical engagements in a strange land, and she was haunted with the idea that Marist would seek her out and find her wherever she went. Thinking thus, she had sunk into a state of despair at a life from which there seemed no escape, and that night her nerves had given way.

Such was the story Stella had told James Raymond on the banks of a far-off river six years before. The scene and its surroundings had made an unforgettable impression on her mind; an impression which in some subtle way she contrived to impart to Glenluce. Sitting in that pretty room, with the sounds of a great city vibrating outside, he seemed to see it all quite vividly: the stillness, the solitude, an empty landscape drenched in white, and two figures standing by a river's brink with the high angle of the bridge above their heads.

He saw in her a suppliant, unconsciously, perhaps, but still a suppliant, and in Robert Lynngarth—her James Raymond—the rare type of human being born to shoulder others' burdens. He had compassion and softness of heart for the weak: tragic weaknesses, these, in a masculine make-up! And that night, six years before,

he accepted the burden which Stella laid (if unconsciously) upon him.

When she had finished relating her story, James Raymond had asked her what she was going to do. She had replied that she did not know, but she did not want to go back to the hotel and Marist. She had not told James Raymond everything about that night, but Glenluce, listening to her now, had the idea that he had guessed the hidden part, and felt that in a sense he was responsible for what had happened to her. Besides, there was his boundless capacity of sympathy for the weak, and Stella's helplessness had no doubt moved him profoundly. Friendless and despairing, she had thrown herself on his ready sympathy, clinging to it like a child putting confiding fingers into the strong grasp of a grown-up. He had probably accepted her trust in the same spirit. He had kept silence for a while, considering (as it afterwards appeared) how best to help her. Then he asked her why she did not return to England. She told him that Marist saw to it that she never had enough money to leave him. He replied: "If it is a question of money, I can manage that. If you were back in England you would be all right."

He had made this proposal to her quite simply, sitting on the river bank with his back against a tree, looking at her in the moonlight. The offer almost took her breath away, and she stared hard at him to see if he were jesting. Afterwards, when she came to know him better, she understood that it was a natural thing for him to do. "I have more money than I know how to spend, at present," he had assured her with a smile, "and as I won it in a lottery you need have no scruples about borrowing a little to take you back to England. You had much better return home to your friends, instead of

staying in a country like this, where you're bound to go to the wall in the long run." She had replied that her father was dead and she was quite alone in the world. His reply was: "The more reason why you should go home. England is a friend to all women. England holds comfort and protection for you."

England, home, comfort, protection! Words with a glamour, these, for an English girl whose weary feet had wandered far and led her into dark places. At that moment she did not guess how utterly she had given her heart to the man who had proffered this advice. Her hesitation about accepting the offer came principally from her fear that she could not get away from Marist. But James Raymond laughed that idea to scorn. He promised to take care of her and look after her until she was safe on board the steamer for England. All she would have to do was to keep up her courage and trust herself to him. It was quite a simple matter to leave Dawnia without the Russian dancer knowing: merely a question of walking three or four miles across country to the first station down the line, and catching the train there at daybreak. She could have some breakfast at this place while he returned to Dawnia for his things, and as she didn't wish to go back, she could buy whatever she needed when they reached the coast.

She accepted his offer as he made it, quite simply, and without any tiresome effusions of gratitude. Their temperaments were very much akin at bottom: impulsive, sanguine, unchilled by the experiences of life, which had not treated them kindly.

They sat there, on the bank of the river, until it was time to start for the station. That part of their enterprise was quite easily accomplished. He piloted her through the bush by moonlight, and just as dawn was

breaking they reached a small straggling collection of houses springing up in the midst of great trees; a place smaller than Dawnia, but, in its way, a counterpart of the larger town they had left behind. The train was not due there for a couple of hours. James Raymond had time to carry out his plan of returning to Dawnia for his goods, and come back in the train to pick up Stella at the wayside station. They reached the coast—which was the capital—on the following day.

At the coastal city they stayed at an hotel overlooking the harbour. There was no boat to England for a fortnight, and they spent their days together. During that time Stella lived in constant apprehension of Marist finding her. James Raymond laughed at her, and told her she need not bother about the Russian now. He would stay with her until she was safe—until the boat sailed. But the fear remained.

It was during the association of this fortnight that she grew to love him so completely that she was never able to put him out of her heart again. She had loved him from the first, actually, but it was not until those final days of sunshine by the sea that the full revelation had come to her. The joy of that awakening was stifled by the knowledge that each day of happiness with him brought closer the time for her departure to England. She dreaded the moment of separation, but it drew nearer and nearer, a grim and inexorable date.

The attitude of James Raymond gave her no reason to hope that he loved her. He had raised her, and given her back self-respect, but apparently he had no love to offer her. She had trusted herself to his care with perhaps a little inward girlish perturbation (knowing something of the ways of men), and he respected her trust

in a manner too absolute to please her. He was unfailing in his kindness and goodness to her, but he returned her wistful looks with eyes which never suggested love. Throughout those days he remained an unknown figure to her, self-contained, a man who lived in a world of his own. She could not guess his thoughts, nor form any just conception of the soul behind his secret reserve.

In a fever of tension her own control gave way. Two days before the departure of the boat she told him she loved him, and begged him not to send her away from him. They were sitting in the tropical gardens which overlooked the blue waters of the bay, where a big white steamer—the steamer for England—was taking in coal. He patted her hand gently and told her that she must not think of him like that. Love, he said, was not for him. There were reasons in his life—he did not say what they were—which barred love and marriage for him. She told him she did not wish him to marry her. She only wanted him to keep her with him and not send her back alone to England, where she would never see him again. He was moved by her appeal, but he let her understand that his lot was a solitary one. “You must go back to England, Stella, dear,” he had said. “There, with your beauty and affection, you will meet some one better able to take care of you, and you will forget all this.” She had clung to him, sobbing, telling him that she could never love anyone as she loved him.

Two days afterwards he saw her off by the steamer. That was another scene in her life which would never fade from her memory. She had to go on board the night before, but he was to be at the wharf in the morning, before the ship sailed, to say good-bye. She was up early, on the look out for him, and when she saw his tall

figure approaching she ran down the gangway onto the pier to meet him. They walked away from the bustle and the throng, and stood together talking, a little distance away, talking platitudes, as people do when about to be separated by thousands of miles, perhaps never to meet again. She kept sad eyes on his face. If he had raised his finger at the last moment she would have stayed. But he did nothing of the kind. The precious minutes slipped away. He hoped she would be comfortable on board. She said the ship was not very full, but there seemed to be some nice people among the passengers. The lady who shared her state room had been very kind, and appeared to have taken a fancy to her. She was a wealthy childless widow named Dester, and she was very pleased that she and the girl were to be companions on the voyage home.

Stella did most of the talking, and James Raymond listened with a grave encouraging smile. She was going to write to him from every port, and he was to send to the post office for her letters. He would write to her . . . often, often? She would send out her English address as soon as she had one, and always she would remember him and his goodness. So her talk ran, rapidly, nervously, in the effort to keep herself up. A voice roared out aboard, ordering all passengers to leave the ship. She felt herself going white to the lips, knowing what that meant, without his murmured words: "You'll have to go aboard, little girl." She clung to his arm as he took her to the gangway.

Aboard, some one was playing Tosti's "Good-bye" on a key-bugle. "Good-bye for ever, good-bye, good-bye, good-bye." The notes floated out as the liner swung away from the pier. People clustered on the pier, waving

handkerchiefs, and the passengers waved back. He stood there, waving his hand. She kept her gaze fixed on his face, in order to carry away with her a memory which should always endure. His figure grew dimmer and smaller. Then the ship's nose swung away, and pointed out to sea, carrying her off from him to her new and unknown destiny.

CHAPTER XXXII

FROM DAWNIA TO REDWAYS

CHANCE was her ally at the outset. Mrs. Dester's fancy proved more than a passing one. Learning that the girl was friendless, she invited her to her own home at Lancaster Gate when the ship reached England. That invitation decided her future. Stella inspired affection, and more. It was soon to be seen that Mrs. Dester looked upon her as a daughter, sent to her by Providence, and, indeed, there was nothing to prevent her thinking so. Stella was alone in the world, and Mrs. Dester was childless: her one son killed early in the war. Their loneliness brought them closer together, and Stella's stay at Lancaster Gate was prolonged. After a time there was no talk of her leaving it again; it had become her home. Her lines had fallen in pleasant places, and she was grateful and content. The past grew dim: she had no misgivings, and serenity was hers. Moreover, she was doing service for her country, as a patriotic Englishwoman should, in times of war. Mrs. Dester turned her large house into a convalescent home for wounded officers, and Stella assisted in nursing the wounded heroes back to health. This gracious and benignant duty did not satisfy her. She wished to do more. It was the fashion of the moment for English girls of social standing to go to the front as nurses. Stella—now looked upon as Mrs. Dester's protégée and heiress—caught the enthusiasm after seeing some badly wounded soldiers arrive at London at midnight. She underwent a course of train-

ing, and was sent out. It was in France that she first set Sir Roger Lynngarth.

"It was fate"—thus she defined it, sadly. "Just a strange chance."

The place of their meeting was a base hospital at Rouen. Stella was nursing there, and Sir Roger on a visit of inspection. Cupid found him vulnerable, and Glenluce, listening to Stella's account of the meeting, was able to understand why. Sir Roger's eyes, seeking objects of interest, had lighted upon a dainty English girl nursing her fellow countrymen. The spectacle appealed to his patriotism, and the beauty of the nurse fired his senses. The moment and surroundings were favourable for the reception of soft emotions in a baronet's heart. Sir Roger Lynngarth fell in love at sight.

Stella did not know that until afterwards. Sir Roger did not speak of love in those grim surroundings. His god just then was not Cupid, but Mars; his immediate objective, the seat of war. As a patriotic Englishman of high standing (and some political importance) Sir Roger had been invited by the Government to deliver exordiums to the British troops at the front. It was in this aspect of a man with a patriotic mission to fulfil that Stella regarded him. She never thought of him in any other light—not then.

The Armistice came shortly afterwards, and the scene changed to London and Lancaster Gate. Sir Roger Lynngarth became a frequent visitor at Mrs. Dester's house. The object of his visits was plain to others but not to Stella. It was Mrs. Dester, a more experienced observer, who first opened her eyes by telling her that Sir Roger Lynngarth was in love with her.

Love! She had no love to give him. All the love in her heart was for his son, though she little dreamed of

the relation in which her James Raymond stood to the dignified gentleman who sought to win her. She had written to James Raymond frequently, but no letters had reached her in return.

"I thought he had forgotten me," she whispered. "I know now that he did not want me to remember him. He thought it best not to write—he believed I would soon forget. I, who would have cherished his least word. But his love was not for me. Then Sir Roger asked me to be his wife. Mrs. Dester said I ought to accept him. She said it was such a splendid chance."

Chance again! Are such tricks of fate purely chance? Glenluce asked himself that question, but could not answer it.

Stella attempted to explain the motives which prompted her to accept Sir Roger's offer. He was kind without expecting too much in return, and his attitude towards her poured balm on the old wounds within her which had not yet healed. Of her past experiences he knew nothing whatever. Glenluce gathered that she made hesitating efforts to impart her story, but her awe of him and his own attitude were not helpful towards these tentative efforts. Sir Roger was not an easy man to confide in, nor was their way of life suitable to the expression of exalted moods. Sir Roger put her on his own level as the adopted daughter of a lady of social standing and wealth. In that situation he had found her, loved her, and deemed her worthy. Stella did not persist. Marriage? After all, James Raymond had wished her to marry, and she was never going to see him again. She was quite sure of that, by this time. What did it matter, then? Sir Roger was kind and she was grateful. That summed it up. As for the rest——

"I didn't love him, and he knew it," she said, with

an effort at extenuation which to Glenluce was unnecessary. "He was quite content that it should be so. So I agreed to marry him."

If she did not bring him love she brought him gratitude, youth and beauty: gifts well worth any man's acceptance. In return, he made her the mistress of Redways, with all that England, and England only, can offer to a woman in such a position. Shortly before her marriage Sir Roger told her of the son who had left England twelve years before, and was supposed to have died abroad. Of course she had not the slightest suspicion of the truth, then or afterwards. There was nothing to hint at it: nothing to connect the memory of Robert Lynngarth with the man she had known as James Raymond. Portraits or paintings? All such at Redways had been carefully removed years before. Even if they had remained they would not have enlightened her. Robert Lynngarth had changed—changed immeasurably—in the course of his twelve years' wanderings.

She tried to do her duty in her new and exalted station. If she brought him no heir, as he had hoped, she was able to reach his expectations in other respects. She had her dower: beauty and music, and the upbringing of the daughter of an English clergyman. With such things she was not likely to be at fault—nor was she, as Glenluce knew. He had seen her, beautiful as an ivory carving, presiding over his dead friend's formal dinner parties with rare grace, and he did not doubt that she could hold her own with the womenfolk equally well. The county was surprised at first, but it was merely a question of time and use.

Time helped her to forget. The past grew dimmer: even the figure of her hero became a trifle shadowy and indistinct. She took her marriage vows very seriously,

as a good girl should, and tried, quite determinedly, to banish all thoughts of James Raymond from her mind. And, if she was not completely successful, the fault lay with the tricks memory plays with the best of us, and not with her.

And then—the mystery and wonder of it!—Chance interfered in her life again; this time to overwhelm her, and topple her from her pinnacle.

Chance, Glenluce learned, appeared to her, at first, as a dark speck in the avenue of Redways: a long trim drive which wound in stately fashion through the trees and parkland which lay between the high road and the house. She was alone in the garden that afternoon. Sir Roger was out in his car, and she was gardening in an aimless sort of way: snipping leaves, gathering blooms, tying frisking tendrils to little stakes. The speck, when she first saw it, had just turned off the distant road through the big iron gates. A little later she observed that it was the figure of a man hobbling up the drive on a crutch. No instinct warned her to rush inside the house and hide herself until he had gone away. She stayed where she was, gardening in her big gloves, humming a little air—the last song her heart was to know—heedless of that approaching shape of doom. It reached the garden gate and leant over, unobserved by her. A voice startled her, addressing her in supplicating accents. She did not recognize it. His voice was not husky and broken, least of all supplicating, when she had heard it last.

She turned in her sanctuary; turned and saw him.

Glenluce could picture that scene: the garden, the drive, the crippled cringing figure at the rustic gate, and her startled lovely face turned questioningly towards it. He could see, too, the change in their respective attitudes as mutual recognition dawned: Stella's eyes widening with

horror, her form, at first tense, drooping like a wounded dove at the sight of that dark face poised over the gate like a snake; a snake ready to strike. From her lips one word, and one only, had fallen: "Marist!"

Her first panic-stricken thought was to fly, but reason told her that flight was useless now. With the appearance of that apparition at the gate the old yoke of terror was laid on her shoulders again. She advanced tremblingly, fearfully towards him. He interpreted her feelings aright, and knew that he held her in the hollow of his hand. They talked in whispers. Marist had fallen on evil times. He had gone into the war on the British side as interpreter, and a chance splinter of shrapnel at Gallipoli had entered his knee and ruined him as a dancer. After the war he had drifted to England, and was then making a precarious way to London, where he hoped to come across compatriots who would help him. The chance which had brought him to Redways was a remark dropped by the landlord of the village inn, where he had stayed on the previous night. The landlord, with the ready sympathy of a fat man, had condoled with him on his crippled condition. The war? A bad war, that. Who'd got anything out of it, he wanted to know, except the politicians? His own son was wounded at Gallipoli—lost a leg. Sir Roger Lynngarth got him a soft job when he came back. As a clerk. All he was fit for now. Sir Roger was one of the right sort—a gentleman—pity there weren't more like him nowadays. The landlord had enlarged so on Sir Roger's goodness to all who had been broken in the war that Marist had asked where the great gentleman was to be found. The landlord had pointed out the gables of Redways from the door of the inn. On the strength of that information Marist had made his way to the big house, hoping that by chance he might

see Sir Roger, and solicit him to help a poor crippled soldier tramping to London. Chance did more than that for him: brought him face to face with the last person in the world he had expected to see again.

Stella gave him money, and by doing so sealed her fate. But, she asked Glenluce piteously, what else could she do—then? Anything, anything, to get him away before he was seen.

He was at such low ebb that he pocketed her bank-note with profuse thanks, and went away. That was only the beginning of course. He obtained Stella's promise to meet him in the park that night, before he returned to the village inn to scheme upon the best method of turning this astounding piece of luck to advantage. He was astute enough to realize that secret meetings between Lady Lynngarth of Redways and a crippled tramp were dangerous, and likely to bring disaster upon them both. When he met her that night he had his plan all ready. He was to come to the house again on the morrow, and in the meantime she was to interest her husband in a wounded soldier she had helped that day, and was to ask Sir Roger to give the poor man a post as a gamekeeper, or something like that. The idea (though he did not say so) was to be near her to bleed her at leisure; without suspicion, or fear of consequences.

It was the abominable scheme of an atrocious scoundrel, and Stella should have unhesitatingly refused to comply with it, although her refusal entailed telling Sir Roger everything. That was Glenluce's thought, but he was not inclined to judge her very harshly. Even then the terror which Marist inspired in her was apparent to him. Her fear of this man was, in its way, an appalling thing, an inexplicable kind of obsession which robbed her of all power of resistance, and was beyond the reach of argu-

ment and reason. It was like a spell cast upon her: a spell which she was powerless to resist. If she had been able to resist it when Marist reappeared, the future might have been different for her. Instead, she weakly yielded, and complied with his demands. Thus it was that Marist came to Redways as gamekeeper.

Her punishment followed swiftly. Marist, once safely established, began to make her life unendurable by his rapacity, his greed and his threats. And there was always her terror, which was a thing apart. She kept him well supplied with money, sealing notes in envelopes and taking them to his cottage, but his cupidity was insatiable. More money, more! That was his incessant demand. He was implacable in this. And there was always the risk that she might be seen or overheard when she went to the cottage by the river. She paid, and paid dearly, for the folly of compliance.

It is impossible to say how long this state of affairs would have remained undiscovered if Robert had not returned. The mysterious chance which brought these three together again added to the difficulties of her own position. It was not that she feared Robert would disclose the past. She knew him too well for that. The prospect of a chance betrayal through surprise she guarded against by placing her photograph in the Painted Room where he was to meet his father. By that device she succeeded in warning him, and later she was able to see him alone in the hall and ensure his silence. No; the increased burden of her suspense came through Marist recognizing in Robert Lynngarth the man who had taken her away from him at Dawnia six years before. Robert did not know Marist had seen the face of the man who disappeared from Dawnia at the time when Stella had fled. Marist was no fool. He had made in-

quiries; put two and two together at the time, and now, after the lapse of years, he was able to check the sum and prove the damning total correct.

Stella's first impulse was to confide the truth to Robert. She was deterred from following this course by two considerations. These were Marist's threats and a womanly shame at disclosing to him that the man in whose subjection she lived was a wretched crippled gamekeeper on her husband's estate. She did not know what he might infer, erroneously, yet naturally, from such a confession. She might have overcome that feeling of humiliation if her fear of Marist, and his threats, had not kept her silent.

She was now in a situation of great complexity. Marist was swayed between greed and jealousy. Not knowing how James Raymond came to appear on the scene as Robert Lynngarth, his first impulse was to attempt to intimidate one whom he believed to be an impostor, but when he learnt the truth from Stella he refrained from a course which would have spelt risk to himself. He realized that he would have short shrift if Robert guessed who he was. So he kept his counsel, and forced Stella to keep hers. But jealousy raged within him like seven devils. He had loved her truly (so he told her) until this infernal Raymond had carried her off from him at Dawnia. He sneered at her earnest assurance that James Raymond (now Robert Lynngarth) had acted like a man of honour towards her. A pretty tale, truly! Hadn't she gone off with him? And here he was, turning up again. Well, they had better look out—the pair of them. So he had whispered to her, with a kind of snarling ferocity. In this frame of mind he fell to watching them closely, prowling round Redways at night, peering through windows, lurking in the back-

ground like a Mephistopheles on crutches, murmuring terrible threats in her ear when he caught her alone.

Then, one night, Robert went to his cottage and threatened him. So he told her afterwards, leaping across the wood for that purpose, and hopping furiously around the house. She had just gone upstairs and heard him. At that fateful sound she looked out, and he beckoned to her. She crept down to him. He was full of anger and displayed a ferocity which frightened her. Threaten him! He'd teach him—teach them both a lesson. Jealousy and wrath blazed up in him fiercely; to such an extent that he swore he'd get even with them both by going to Sir Roger and telling him how she had run away from him at Dawnia with his son.

That was a threat which frightened Stella effectually. She believed he would do it, and what would happen then? In despair she determined to tell Robert everything, and she scribbled a hasty note which she put under his door, asking him to meet her next day in the churchyard. He kept that appointment, and she told him part of the truth—that Marist was back in England. But his reception of that piece of news checked the remainder of her intended confession. Her resolution to tell him all the truth crumbled within her as she saw the look in his eyes. She had a glimpse of something which caused her soul to quake within her. She had made a mistake, and she knew it. She realized that if these two men met it would only make matters worse—ininitely worse. She had told half the truth, but she would not tell the rest. She endeavoured to save her blunder that way. Robert might think or guess what he liked, but he wouldn't do anything unless he was quite sure.

“So I said no more,” she said.

That meeting was interrupted by Sir Roger. She did

not know how much of their conversation he had overheard, but she feared the worst. That thought made her shiver. It was not his discovery, but what he would read into it. Better, far better, if she had disclosed her secret while there was time. For he would not believe her now.

Afterwards—that same night—she learnt how bad it was. Robert found her alone, in the drawing-room. His eyes answered her look before he spoke. Then he told her.

Fear of her husband was swallowed up in the chilling news of Robert's sentence of banishment. She had found him again only to lose him! It unloosened all the innate recklessness of her disposition. All things paled beside her love for him, and the knowledge that her life was worthless without his presence. He spoke of this hurried talk as their last meeting. She could not bear that. And besides, she had not yet told him all. She knew that the truth about Marist must come out now. He could—and would—save her from him. She said she would go to his room that night and tell him. He implored her not to attempt such a thing: spoke wise counsel, urging prudence, patience, resignation—barren things for a woman in despair. He did everything he could to dissuade her, but she was in no mood to be dissuaded. She was in the mood to do desperate things. She was lonely and overwhelmed, and in that frame of mind the conventions go overboard. She begged him to let her see him that night, for the last time, the very last time! Moved by her entreaties, he gave way.

She had something else in her mind, but waited until she saw him that night before disclosing it.

“I asked him to take me out of England, because I cared nothing for life without him.”

Robert refused. He begged her not to talk in such a way. "Go to my father and tell him everything." Such was the burden of his advice. He assured her she had nothing to fear if she trusted her husband, and that the best thing he could do was to go away and leave them together. This advice was unpalatable to her sad heart. She replied brokenly that she did not love Sir Roger. And then there came a knock at the door, and she heard her husband's voice outside. "Robert!" he called.

She was badly frightened, and did not know what to do. Robert remained quite calm. He made a gesture towards a piece of furniture (a dwarf bookcase, she thought) standing a little way from the wall, near the door. She understood, and slipped behind it like a flash. Then he went to the door and opened it.

Her hiding-place was none of the best, and she waited, quaking. She steeled herself for outcry, discovery, shame. What could she have said—what excuse brought forward? But she had nothing to fear after all. Sir Roger had not come there in search of her. Standing a little within the room, close to her ostrich nook between the bookcase and the open door, he addressed his son, in level even tone. "If there is anything you wish to see me about, Robert, before you go, you will find me in the Painted Room." That was all. Having said this, he uttered a brief "Good night!" and went out of the room again.

This incident, with its perils so narrowly averted, marked a turning-point of feeling (if not of heart) within her. When the coast was clear she bade Robert good night, and went to her room. There she passed half an hour in sobering reflection. In that moment her conduct appeared before her eyes in its true light. She saw her folly and she saw her duty: saw them both aright. The love of Robert Lynngarth was not for her, and could

never be hers. Whatever the future held for her, it could not hold that. It was true she loved him and would always love him, for one cannot control love, but, failing his in return, she could take the path of duty which he had pointed out to her. It was a hard path to tread, but at least she would not fail him there. She decided to go downstairs to her husband and tell him all, and ask him to forgive her.

"I went down. The house was dark and silent, but there was a light beneath the door of the Painted Room, and I heard voices within. I believed it was Robert, with his father, and I thought it would be better for me to wait until the morning. So I went back to my room."

Stella was silent for some moments, then went on, but with an evident effort:

"It was not Robert in there, but Marist. He told me about it, afterwards."

Marist was abroad that night, like an uneasy ghost, prowling around Redways on his two legs. He could use the maimed one when he chose, after a fashion. In fact, it had become a fairly serviceable limb again, though spoilt for dancing. But the soi-disant gamekeeper retained his crutch because it gained him sympathy and kept him at Redways. He even used it in his nocturnal prowlings, as a rule. But this night he was so late in going abroad that he thought he might safely leave the encumbrance behind at his cottage. Skulking and watching in the garden, he saw a light in the Painted Room. He approached the window. Pressing his face against it, he could just get a glimpse within, and he saw Sir Roger sitting at his bureau, writing. Sir Roger looked up, and their eyes met.

Sir Roger rose swiftly from his chair, and came to the window, flinging it open. "You, Wells!" he exclaimed.

"What is the matter? What do you want here, at this hour?" Marist did not stir, but just stood there, looking at him. But his mind was working quickly. In that instant of mental tension all considerations except the desire for revenge were swept away. Hatred of Robert Lynngarth swept through his brain like a flame. Here was the chance, his chance of revenge, and of extorting money from Sir Roger Lynngarth at the same time. He did not hesitate. Impulse and opportunity, coming together, overcame him, as they have overcome better men. "I wish to speak to you, Sir Roger." Sir Roger's answer was to step back from the window, and Marist took that as an indication that he might enter. He stepped in, noiselessly as a cat. "What is it that you wish to see me about?" Sir Roger asked. "I have something to tell you about your wife—and your son," Marist said.

Those words were all he was destined to utter. Sir Roger went white. "How dare you, you scoundrel!" he exclaimed, and struck the gamekeeper across the face. The blow was feeble enough in all conscience, but sufficient to let loose the other's ferocious temper. With a snarl and an oath he closed with Sir Roger, catching him by the throat. Sir Roger gave a faint cry, and then, with a convulsive movement, fell to the floor. Marist bent over him, and to his horror saw that he was dead. At that moment he heard the sound of footsteps in the corridor outside. They were Stella's, but he did not know that.

It all happened in an instant: the blow, the fall, and the sound of footsteps. At that moment Marist believed that he had killed Sir Roger. Facing the door in a frenzy of terror, he caught up the body in his arms, and stepped through the open window with it, still glancing backwards towards the door. His first impulse was to drop the body on the lawn and take to his heels, but fears for

his own skin led him to carry it away and hide it until he considered the position. Danger is a great quickener of the wits: the old tower came to his mind as an excellent hiding-place. With an inward shudder he shouldered his burden and carried it there. Again the instinct of self-preservation asserted itself, prompting him to carry the body up to the belfry and fasten the door downstairs before making an exit by scrambling through the window. When he had done this he felt fairly safe—for the moment. Thinking it all over as he walked back to his cottage by the river, he decided to avoid suspicion by remaining where he was and going about his duties as usual until he saw what was likely to happen.

It was afterwards, when he learnt that the guilt of murder was not his, and that he was in no danger, that he told Stella what had happened. The shock had had a chastening effect upon him. It may have been the penitence of a devil sick, but it was sincere while it lasted. He had said: "I am glad that it is not through me that your husband is dead. I tried for revenge, but that is all over now. I am sorry." Two days after the funeral he went away without further word; left his cottage and his strange pets—his birds, his parrots and his bats—for good.

"I have a little more to tell you concerning myself," Stella went on. "Next morning, when I was told that Sir Roger was missing, I believed that Robert knew what had happened, because I thought it was he who was in the Painted Room with Sir Roger when I went downstairs in the dark. It was all so strange and mysterious, but it seemed to me that whatever had taken place was bound to come out. I dared not ask Robert—I feared to. But though I wronged him in my thoughts I wanted to help him at all risks. Besides, I feared for my own secret.

Not through Robert; I knew he would not say anything to hurt me, no matter what happened to himself. No; there was another reason. You see, Sir Roger had been very cold and distant with me at dinner, and he went to his study immediately afterwards, saying that he had important letters to write. When he disappeared I could not help wondering if those letters concerned myself and Robert. That was a thought which troubled me greatly. I slipped along the corridor and into the Painted Room while they were searching for Sir Roger upstairs. I opened some of the drawers of the bureau, but they were all stuffed full of papers, and I dared not stay long. In the afternoon you came. I knew you would make a better search than I——”

She broke off here with a penitent smile, as if entreating forgiveness.

“It was I who crept after you into the Painted Room, and took the letter from the bureau. I got out of the window, as you supposed—the same way that I left it in the morning, when I forgot to unlock the door. Sometimes I thought you guessed. I have seen you looking at me, in a way——” She met his glance seriously, coloured a little, and went on: “I opened the letter when I got back to my room. It was about myself. So I burnt it.” Again her colour rose, but as quickly faded away.

“And now, I have told you everything,” she said, in a tired weak voice. “I sent for you because of Robert, knowing you would understand. Although he shielded me, he loves Kathleen, and Kathleen has let him go away. I would not have let him go if he had loved me. I knew, of course, that we had to part for ever after all this happened. Even if Robert had loved me there was his father’s death—for which I was partly to blame—be-

tween us. And there was the relationship. But Robert did not love me in the way that I loved him. When I went to Fenchurch Street to say good-bye to him, I knew that I was seeing his dear face for the last time. He stood there telling me to be brave, and to try and be happy at Redways and take care of Kathleen for his father's sake. I did not tell him that I had made up my mind not to go back to Redways. What was Redways to me, when he had gone? Since then, he has never been out of my mind. Night and day I see him, a solitary figure, in that far-off lonely island. In my dreams I see him in danger, holding out his hands for help—help which never comes. And I want you to go to Redways and tell Kathleen all that I have told you. Robert should never have gone away again, and since I have been here something tells me that it may have been through me. If Kathleen has wronged him in any way she must send and bring him back. I have been quite frank with you, for Robert's sake, and you must tell Kathleen just as I have told you. Will you do this?"

"Yes," he said.

"When will you see her?"

"I will go down in the morning."

"Tell her that Robert loved her all through. I know that now, if she doesn't. Tell her, if she loves him, to go out to the island and bring him back."

"I will tell her."

"Thank you." She held out her hand. "Good-bye."

"I will come and see you again when I return from Redways," he said, rising to his feet.

"That is kind of you," she said. "Will you give Robert a message from me when he comes back? I have left him my money—Sir Roger's money. I wrote to Mr. Baron about it. He quite agreed: a wise precaution,

he called it. Redways is Robert's and his father's money will be his. No; not a message—better not. Give him my love, Colonel Glenluce. Just my love—he will understand. You will meet him some day again—when he comes back to marry Kathleen—and you will remember?"

"You will meet him yourself," said Glenluce, "meet him in happier circumstances, when all this is past and forgotten."

Stella did not reply to that. "Good-bye, Colonel Glenluce," she said once more. "You have been very kind."

She turned away her head, and he could see that she was sobbing a little. He realized that she had no thought for him, and turned sadly away.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE UTTERMOST PARTS OF THE SEA

AT the foot of the obsidian cliffs a level blue sea sparkled in a glittering confusion of silver caused by myriads of small fish moving in a compact mass northward to some unknown spawning destination. From the south-east they came, steering north and north-east. Heroic voyagers they, encompassed by dangers above and below. Great fish pursued them in the sea—hordes of red cod, barracouta, hapuku, and dogfish—hunting the little fish so ferociously that portions of the shoal were forced above the surface of the water by those underneath endeavouring to escape. But the great fish did not have it all their own way. Many were destined to furnish supper in their turn for the spotted seals which brought up the rear of the great, slow-moving procession, barking huskily, like sheepdogs in charge of an unruly flock.

Above, the air was full of birds assembled for the feast: gulls, shags, whalebirds and albatrosses. There were plenty of penguins and rockhoppers too—whole troops of them—but as they couldn't fly they remained in the sea beneath, feasting without intermission. They had the advantage there, but there was more than enough to go round without the noise and quarrelling which attended the banquet. The birds, at least, did not bring the civilized virtue of manners to table. They swooped and gorged and fought with a clamour which echoed through the desolate islets for miles around.

A barracouta, springing from the water after a fish

borne aloft by a grey-headed albatross, flopped gasping on the water-logged rocks at the extremity of the obsidian cliffs. From its gaping jaws little fish came hopping and sliding like souls released from purgatory, to wriggle back into their cool natural element. Robert Lynngarth, standing at the foot of the cliffs, stooped and flung the large fish higher on the rocks. Smoked barracouta was not bad at a pinch, and a change from tinned food. Then he turned his eyes seaward again to watch the strange sight.

He had been back on the island for more than three months, making his return journey as he had departed from it after the great storm nine months before, to the intense amazement of Captain Marquet. The jaw of that bearded mariner had dropped when his eye fell upon the tall figure of James Raymond coming up the gangway of the *Ascanius*, berthed at the quay of the colonial city, bound for Sanctuary Island once more. Captain Marquet told himself he'd seen some queer starts in his life, but nothing queerer than this. "Well, I'm damned!" he said to himself, not once, but half a dozen times, as if repeating some formula of exorcism. He was filled with a curiosity which James Raymond did not gratify. But his own inveterate loquacity survived that treatment. In a truly Christian spirit he repaid ungrateful reticence with a flood of gossip of what had happened in that part of the world since the former curator had departed. There had been a new Government and an earthquake shock in the colonial city (the earthquake had, it appeared, caused most stir) and a change of lighthouse-keepers on the southern circuit. Yes, and the caretaker who had succeeded him on Sanctuary Island had disappeared. Gospel truth! A queer-looking bird he was, pretty good at bending the elbow. Perhaps it was the drink that finished him. At any rate, there was no sign

of him when the *Ascanius* made her next call at the island with stores. Not a sign—and they wasted two days there searching for him. He had vanished into thin air or dropped into the sea. Captain Marquet inclined to the opinion that the blessed fool had got the blues there by himself, taken one drink too many, and flopped off the cliffs in the dark. However that might be, the island had run wild since. This was the second man who had disappeared from the island and never been seen again, and a third had gone mad there. The place had a bad name in consequence. There was no curator there at present. No one wanted the job until Raymond had turned up again. “No wonder, after what happened! Why should any man want to live in such a God-forsaken spot looking after a few —— birds?” asked Captain Marquet, bestowing an adjective upon the feathered denizens of Sanctuary Island which by sheer force of alliteration seemed to soothe his indignation a little. “Why should they?” he repeated, fixing resentful eyes upon his inscrutable passenger. “Why, indeed?” James Raymond, smoking meditatively, had replied, ignoring that roundly curious glance. His own eyes were fixed seaward.

In due time the vague outline of Sanctuary Island appeared like a shadow on the shining highway of the sea. Later, as the declining sun touched the glittering cliffs with slanting beam, a boat crept round and landed a man and dog at the landing-place. The man was James Raymond, but the dog was not his former companion in solitude. It was a mere puppy, as yet untrained, and full of the futile enthusiasms of youth. Once again, Captain Marquet, edging the nose of the *Ascanius* away for the southern lighthouses, carried away with him a memory of a solitary figure gazing steadfastly over the sea, with seabirds wheeling and crying above him.

Thus Robert Lynngarth came to his sanctuary again. Once more he was James Raymond, keeper of a bird preserve, and guardian of the islands around him. Does hard work give peace? There was plenty of it here, to his hand: a wilderness to restore, fresh tracks to cut, overgrown paths to clear, timber to fell. The acclimatized birds had become shy and unused to him; the wild cats were bold and numerous. There were traps to set and expeditions to make. It was nesting time with the songsters, and the dog (muzzled, for his morals were weak where eggs were at stake) had to be trained to seek and discover hidden nests in wooded groves. And there were trips to the surrounding islands to search for wind-blown birds. Yes; there was plenty for James Raymond to do; from dawn, when he arose, to dusk, when he returned to the hut to sup with the dog and spend his evenings preparing his maps and reports.

It was his former life, yet different, though not in externals. The island was as he remembered it, and the ever-changing sea was unchanged. The birds, the cliffs and the surrounding islets, were as he had known them, but they were no longer desirable. The peace which was theirs was denied to him. He had sought sanctuary again, but had not found it.

The beginning of the change he could trace to illness. It was summer when he returned, and for weeks the islands were lapped in a translucent blue in which they seemed to float. Tempted by the calm, he made long journeys in his boat, venturing farther into the wilderness of tombstone rocks than he had ever dared go before. One evening a sudden storm overtook him far from Sanctuary Island, and marooned him for the night on a bleak and barren rock. At daybreak he made his way back to his island, shivering and burning. Four days' fever

left him weak, with a cough, and a stabbing pain in the back when he breathed.

From that illness he had never completely recovered. The cough and the pain in his lungs did not leave him. He stuck to his daily tasks, but returned to the hut at night with a white face and eyes bright with fever. But his worst symptom by far was that he was now oppressed by the solitude which surrounded him, and saw in it shapes visible to his eyes alone. He looked over his shoulder when he walked, and sometimes quickened his steps. . . .

In the evening, when the short dusk faded and darkness veiled the island in an obscurity profound as everlasting night, he had moments when he felt that he was no longer alone, though the eyes peering stealthily at him from the shadows were not human. Perhaps illness had weakened his faculties, or it may be that solitude had intensified his imagination, but at these times he was weighed down with a sensation of such intolerable horror and loneliness that he could have cried aloud.

Resolutely he endeavoured to banish his fears, his fears and his phantoms, but they always returned; latterly by day as well as night. The visitation followed a set course which had become invariably familiar to him by repetition. First a sense of horror and desolation unspeakable; next, the impression that he was watched or followed—without footfalls—by some frightful elemental force which would sooner or later become visible to his eyes. And when that happened. . . . He tried not to think of it, but thought rode him savagely, like a witch-hag. Madness? That would be the end. He was still sufficiently sane to realize it. Or a jump off the cliff, like the last curator, who had disappeared from the island while he was in England.

The glittering cliffs had an intolerable fascination for him now. They beckoned him from their heights, and he climbed up and looked down at the sea plunging against their wrinkled sides. "Come!" the sea cried to him. "Come, here is peace." He would turn away, to seek by incessant labour the peace which had been his before, but he always returned. He knew that he was deteriorating—weakening. His will ebbed, slowly, yet surely, like a sluggish receding tide.

He had one of these terrible visitations now. The invisible thing, this unimaginable horror, whatever it was, was behind him at that moment, looking down with him into the sea. He dared not glance around. The immensity of fear contained in that short space was almost beyond human endurance. Then the agony passed. The thing had gone—gone seaward, leaving him with such a blessed sense of relief that he could have laughed out for joy.

But he knew it would return.

The shoal and its devourers passed away to the north, with the exception of one spotted seal, which had made for a penguinery, and was killing penguins with the ferocity of a true leopard of the sea. Robert decided to go out in the boat in the morning and kill it. Then he picked up the barracouta from the rocks and started for the hut.

Night was approaching fast, falling swiftly upon sea and islands. Robert felt dizzy and ill, and the pain in his side pierced him. The path seemed to rock beneath him as if the island had at last yielded to the eternal pressure of the sea. He became aware of a deadly languor in his limbs, which weighed down his frame. He stumbled occasionally as he walked, and the hut appeared very far away. He had strange moments when the dark-

ening track disappeared, and everything went black. He realized wearily that he was very ill.

It was long after dark when he reached the hut. The dog, shut up inside, greeted him frantically, as one returned from the dead. He fed the animal, and made some tea for himself, which he drank thirstily. Then he drew a chair to the fire and fell into a dull stupor.

The stupor passed as the fever grew, and played tricks with his brain. He walked about the hut, muttering. The dog, eyes askant, crept away. Imagination flared with hectic brilliance. He was back in England—at Redways. Faces and figures—the hut was full of them. There was Stella's face, tender and pleading, sweet as a flower, but a flower crushed; Kathleen's too; dark eyes raised coldly to his. And a figure on a crutch, by the door. But the sound of sea on the rocks? There was no sea at Redways. . . . No, no! He was not at Redways. He was in the hut on Sanctuary Island, away from England, alone—"beyond the reach of hands." How did that line run, now . . . Swinburne. . . . Where was the book? He used to read it—read it before——

The dog crept farther away as he stumbled like a drunken man to a shelf of books—a strange collection, brought together by unknown hands. Robert's eyes sought restlessly for the volume of which he was in quest—*Pickwick*, Cruden's *Concordance*, *A Tale of a Tub*, *My Sweetheart Louise*, *Pelham*, *Midshipman Easy*. These, and some tattered magazines of ancient date, a volume of sermons, and Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads*, in a green and gold cover. Swinburne . . . he used to read him in his college days. He could write poetry . . . a rebel, too, in his time, but quiet enough now.

He carried the book to the table and sat down. Two lines stood out from the page as he opened it:

“Is it worth a tear, is it worth an hour,
To think of things that are well outworn?”

Perhaps not, but if a life was nothing but memories what was to be done? Not think at all? Good advice, but difficult to follow. The poets advised Nature, but Nature had its limitations, like humanity. Barren philosophy, that . . .

“It is not much that a man can save
On the sands of life, in the straits of time . . .”

True; yet the little was worth saving, if it could be saved.

“I wish we were dead together to-day,
Lost sight of, hidden away out of sight . . .”

That was Stella’s wish—almost the last thing she had said to him. She longed for death, she said. Death? What was death? Was it to be “filled full of the night” and nothing more? Poor little Stella . . . He read on:

“How we should slumber, how we should sleep,
Far in the dark with the dreams and the dews!
And dreaming, grow to each other, and weep,
Laugh low, live softly, murmur and muse. . . .”

Love in the grave? No, no! Sleep was the thing there. The dead deserved their rest. His eyes alighted on another verse:

“You have chosen and clung to the chance they sent you,
Life sweet as perfume and pure as prayer.
But will it not one day in heaven repent you?
Will they solace you wholly, the days that were?”

Will you lift up your eyes between sadness and bliss,
Meet mine, and see where the great love is,
And tremble and turn and be changed? Content you;
The gate is strait; I shall not be there."

Those lines might have been written about Kathleen and himself. They were true too. He would not be there—neither as Robert Lynngarth nor James Raymond.

"... who now on earth need care how I live?
Have the high gods anything left to give. . . ."

Nothing—except death. The pages slipped through his fingers.

"I will go back to the great sweet mother,
Mother and lover of men, the sea."

Well, he had gone back to her, and she had failed him.

"I will go . . ."

Stop! Who was that reading over his shoulder? He broke off abruptly, staring around the hut, but could see nothing living except the dog, crouching in the corner. He turned again to his book, but now the lines danced beneath his eyes.

". . death is the worst that comes of thee;
Thou art fed with our dead . . .

. . . hopes that hurt . . . dreams that hover,
Shall they not vanish away and apart?"

In death—yes; but everything vanished then. After all, death was not a solution of life. Swinburne was

dead—gone to the grave with his music like the swish of the sea. . . .

He pushed the book from him, and took off his coat, oppressed with a great heat, which seemed to consume him. Through the open window the cool lap of the sea against the cliffs reached his ears. He went to the door, and out.

Outside, a moon at full flooded the sea and islands with light. Robert made his way to the landing-place and across the shingle beach, then turned into the narrow path which led to the cliffs, scaling it until he came to the heights. On he went until he reached the brink, and stood looking around him. The scene which stretched before him was wonderfully beautiful, but not as Robert saw it. He was no longer Robert Lynngarth, but a fever-ridden being in the grip of delirium. He had crossed the borderline between sanity and the irrational. His illusions had become hallucinations—madness. The immense and pitiless whiteness reflected to his vision snake-like forms uncoiling from the sparkling sea, and rising higher and higher to look at him on the edge of the cliffs before dropping noiselessly back into the depths again. He turned his back on these revolting objects, and retraced his steps down the steep path to the beach and landing-place. Here he again stopped, looking out to sea.

The moon had reached its zenith, steeping everything in a white glare so mercilessly vivid that it might have been that last eternal light which shall reveal the foundations of the world and lay bare the souls of all men. It searched the sea and flooded the islands. Coatless and hatless, Robert looked about him. He noted the glistening of the rocks caused by the imperceptible rise and fall of the ocean's swell. Afar, his eye detected rows of

birds roosting in tiers on the slopes of Babbling Island, named so because of the noises made by the great numbers of penguins and mollyhawks which congregated there. He recalled that an old whaler in the South Seas had once assured him that the number of people and penguins upon earth were exactly equal, every human soul entering a penguin's egg at death, and every penguin's finding lodgment in a new-born babe. A mad idea! Its author declared that it had been revealed to him in a vision. He lived alone too.

It was ebb-tide; he could see the caves uncovered at Groaning Island, where the sea gurgled in and out great holes at low water. Stay, though! Wasn't the sea mounting in the moonlight, mounting to a great height? An awful sight! He closed his eyes to shut it out. When he opened them again he was relieved to see the water as before. But what was that hairy form straddled on the landing-place? As he looked it dived with a splash, came up again, and swam southward with great speed.

From the empty stillness of the sea he thought he heard a sound, coming, it seemed, from the tripartite rock he had named Calvary. He listened intently, bending his head to catch it better. Yes; he was not mistaken. It was a thudding noise, growing clearer and clearer, coming from behind those three splintered crags. Thud, thud, thud! Each measured beat reached his ears plainly now. The Nails of Fate again! *Te semper anteit sæva Necessitas*. . . . Was it here, in this lonely spot, Fate made the crosses for humanity's crucifixion? Was this the explanation and the meaning of all?

A shadow fell across the brightness of the water, floating from the three-peaked rock in the direction of the landing-place. To the half-crazed figure on the beach it

took shape as the visible manifestation of his terror coming at last from Calvary to seize him.

He turned and fled, with no thought but to reach the shelter of the hut before it could overtake and destroy him. Up the slope he raced, with the horror of the impossible behind him. The hut door flapped open in the moonlight. He rushed within and barred and bolted the door. Panting, he stood in the dark, listening. The strange noise still throbbed from Calvary Island, but to the listener within the sound came closer, until he deemed it to be the thing which had stalked him home, trying to batter down the door of the hut to get at him. Then his consciousness completely and mercifully fled.

CHAPTER XXXIV

MOVING WATERS CANNOT QUENCH LOVE

“**N**O,” said Captain Marquet, balancing himself in the stern sheets, “it’s not to be done. That’s what I said last night when Miss Chester wanted to land at once, and that’s what I say now. I’ll take no chances with this current. I know these seas—none better—and I’m not going to risk a good boat this morning any more than the *Ascanius* last night. We can’t go closer in with this swell on. You’ll have to be carried ashore.”

The boat tossed uneasily in the white surf. Behind, a frisky sea danced gaily in crested waves through groups of barren rocks, with the *Ascanius* gently rising and falling in the distance; in front, the grim cliffs and shingle beach of Sanctuary Island, and a landing-place at present a-wash. Lady Mercer glanced towards it, then cast an agitated look over the side of the boat at the teeth of rock bared in the seething green, marking the mouth of the narrow channel which led to the shore.

“It looks shockingly dangerous,” she said sharply. “I do not like the idea at all. Suppose the man was to slip?”

“Not likely. Looks much worse than it is.” Captain Marquet was genially tolerant of feminine fears. “Steady, there, Tom”—he spoke to a brown and hairy seaman in the bow—“we’ll drop the grapnel among these rocks. Slack away a bit. Now, let her ride easy, just outside the bar. No, no. There’s no danger, m’m”—this to

Lady Mercer again—"we've carried bags of stores ashore from here with the tide like this, haven't we, Tom?"

"I'm not a bag of stores." Lady Mercer spoke with austerity, again looking at the broken hissing water between the boat and the landing-place. She turned to the girl beside her, and murmured: "I must say this is very like Robert, living in such a place." Resolution came to her with an effort. "Very well, then; if there is no other way——"

Captain Marquet gripped a projecting rock to steady the boat, and nodded to the barefooted and bareheaded seaman in the bow. The man scrambled into the shallow water, and lifted Lady Mercer over the gunwale with miraculous ease. Lady Mercer shut her eyes, and was safely carried ashore. Captain Marquet followed with the slender figure which had been seated beside her, leaving the empty boat rocking easily in the mouth of the channel.

"Well, here we are at last, Kathleen!" Lady Mercer said, looking round her curiously from the security of the landing-place, beyond the reach of lapping waves. "This is a pretty jaunt for one at my time of life. When I told Robert at Redways that I should like to see his island I never supposed that it would ever come to pass, or that I would be carried ashore in the arms of a strange sailor. However, it's an accomplished fact. Now, what next?"

Kathleen did not reply. She dared not. At that moment she was in an exalted and highly strung mood, beset by emotions which made her feel weak and hysterical at the end of her long journey. Her colour came vividly and she breathed fast, but her eyes were very serious as she stood at the goal of her dreams of the past weary months. This was reality: this was his home—this frown-

ing place of screaming birds, looking out on an empty mysterious sea and barren rocks which rose from the deep like contorted and petrified ghosts. Desolation unspeakable; desolation complete! Her eyes, searching this scene to the lonely horizon, saw it in blurred outline, through tears. She had sent him back to it, because she lacked faith. Would he forgive her now? Ah, why had she doubted him? He must be made to understand that through it all she had always loved him. Yet love meant faith, and she had failed him there—failed him grievously.

A voice broke into her meditations. Captain Marquet spoke.

"That's where the curator lives, m'm, up that slope."

"That hut!" Lady Mercer inspected through glasses. "After Redways!" she murmured in an undertone.

"Kathleen, my dear——"

But Kathleen was looking at the hut with her heart in her eyes, looking at it as if she loved it too; mean and unsightly as it was, crouched above her on the little hill. Captain Marquet, eyeing it with less emotion, noticed that the door was closed and the chimney without smoke. Strange! The chap must have seen the *Ascanius*, unless he was still in bed, which was hardly likely. With a slight inward uneasiness which he manfully concealed, Captain Marquet gruffly ordered the sailor to go ahead and tell the curator he was wanted. Kathleen, dark eyes aglow with excitement, would dearly have liked to be the bearer of that message, but girls must observe conventions even on desert islands, and Lady Mercer's glance was upon her. But she wished Lady Mercer would walk a little faster. The distance was short, however. They reached the hut, and were confronted by the spectacle of Tom knocking loudly at the closed door.

"I can't make him hear," he said, as they approached.

"Gone out early, I expect," said Captain Marquet, speaking casually.

"The door's fast," observed the sailor in a low voice. "There's a dog inside. I can hear it scratching and whining."

Lady Mercer made a sign of fear, and Kathleen, going swiftly white, stepped to the door and placed her hand on the latch. Captain Marquet put her aside and tried the door, rattling the wooden latch sharply.

"Raymond, Raymond!" he cried, and "Raymond" came echoing back from the hills in a faint spectral tone, like the ghost of his own hearty voice.

The echo died away, and was succeeded by perfect silence. They looked at one another with bated breath. Kathleen's heart beat quickly, and she placed her hand there unconsciously. Her distressed eyes sought Captain Marquet's. The captain felt that it was his duty as a man to say something reassuring.

"No need to worry, Miss Chester," he said. "Likely as not he's gone for a cruise in his boat."

"The boat's hauled up on that shingle beach," said the sailor, pointing to it.

"When I want your talk I'll ask for it," said Captain Marquet curtly. "What you've to do is to unfasten those shutters and get through that window. Up with you, man—skipper's orders. Sharp's the word. Here, I'll give you a leg."

The shutter yielded easily, and the man got through. Listening, they heard his footfall in the stillness within, followed by the sound of a stumble and a sharp exclamation. Then the door flew open and revealed a scared brown face.

"He's here," he stammered. "He and the dog. But——"

"What is it?" cried Kathleen, endeavouring to look over his shoulder, but Captain Marquet pushed past the man into the hut. A beam of light fell slanting through the darkness on a figure prone on the floor within. Captain Marquet bent down, but Kathleen was before him, and beheld the white face of Robert Lynngarth in the gloom. She could detect no semblance of life. "He is dead," she whispered.

"No; not dead," said Captain Marquet sharply. "Quick, Tom, bear a hand here."

Between them they lifted Robert onto his bed. The light from the window streamed in on the bunk, and Marquet bent over the unconscious form. A rough knowledge of doctoring gained afloat in lonely seas was useful now. He felt Robert's pulse, and placed his ear against his chest to listen to his laboured breathing. Kathleen stood beside him, watching breathlessly.

"In a fever and been delirious," the captain announced. "High temperature, I expect. Looks like pneumonia, or something of that sort. I had a hand bad like him last year. You remember poor Peter Brown, Tom?"

"Yes," responded the sailor, nodding a sagacious head towards the sea as an indication of the ultimate end of poor Peter Brown.

"Oh!" Kathleen's startled eyes were lifted from the inert face of Robert to Captain Marquet's. "He is ill—dying, perhaps. What are we to do?"

"He'd better be taken aboard, I think. We can look after him better there." He glanced round the hut. "There's nothing here for a sick man. Half his stores untouched too. Looks as though he's been starving himself."

"No wonder!" broke in Lady Mercer sharply. She also had been taking note of the hut and its contents. "No wonder," she repeated in angry voice, "if this is all he had to eat! Biscuits like stone, tinned meat, and mouldy cheese. So this is the simple life? I wish we were safe back in England. Captain Marquet, you and your man had better carry Sir Robert—Mr. Raymond—down to the boat at once. The sooner we get him away from here the better."

"It's not so easily managed as you think."

Captain Marquet answered thus with the resentment of professional pride in arms. Lady Mercer might have chartered the *Ascanius* for this trip, but neither that fact, nor her title or wealth, gave her the right to address him, Captain John Marquet, commander of the Dominion Government's lighthouse steamer, as if he were the mere skipper of a Thames pleasure boat.

"Why not?" asked Lady Mercer shortly.

Captain Marquet's spine stiffened a shade more. He told himself that this was coming it a bit strong. Would the lady have spoken so to the captain of the liner which brought her out from England? He reckoned not. Well, he would teach her that Captain Marquet was just as much to be respected, even if he didn't wear gold lace and trimmings.

"The tide's turned, for one thing." He pointed through the open door to the sea, and the *Ascanius* rising and falling in the distance. "There's an ugly current off here at ebb-tide, and it's a long dangerous journey with five in the boat. We should have to lay him at full-length, you know. He'll want careful watching too." He indicated the unconscious form in the bunk, now moaning and tossing deliriously.

"There's his motor-boat on the beach," suggested the

sailor. "Why not put him in that? I could follow you out."

"Through the channel and rocks of the reef?" said Captain Marquet. "Not to be thought of."

"Then what's to be done?" exclaimed Lady Mercer distractedly.

Kathleen, anxiously fanning Robert's face, looked up quickly.

"Please, Captain Marquet, think of some way at once. Do not let us remain in this dreadful situation. We depend on you."

He caught her look and nodded. He had feasted his eyes upon the younger of his two passengers during the voyage from the teacup city, and the dewy glance of slim and dark-eyed beauty in distress melted his heart now. He was the resourceful mariner again immediately, quick to overcome obstacles.

"The best way is to take him off in a larger boat, with a stretcher to carry him down to the landing-place," he said. "Some one had better stay here till we return."

"Very well," said Lady Mercer. "Who——"

"I will stay," said Kathleen simply.

So it was decided without more words. A moment or two later the boat cast off from its anchorage with three figures in it, and from the hut Kathleen saw them go. Then she turned her eyes from the open door. She was alone with the man she loved in the lonely place of her distant dreams.

Outside, the immobile expanse of water was dissolving golden red beneath great slanting beams of the risen sun, which, by the sheer glory of sunlight, turned that scene of desolation into one of beauty, and stilled the unrest of the sea into a murmuring content. Beneath the magic of the sun's spell it flowed gently in sound and shallow,

and lapped against black and riven crags with scarcely a ripple of its smooth, unruffled surface. Within the hut Kathleen was dimly aware that she was surrounded by an immensity of solitude and peace. She sat beside Robert, her eyes fixed on his white face, her slim cool fingers holding his burning hand. He had not stirred since the others had left her in the hut. She felt as if she were the one being left alive in an empty world: a girl alone with bitter and unavailing regret. She sat quite still, looking down at Robert, praying, hoping, praying. . . .

An hour passed, though she had no knowledge of its flight. Once the sick man stirred and muttered something. She bent over him anxiously, wetting his lips with a little water, and he sank into stupor again. She began to wonder when the boat would return, but could see nothing through the open door but a shining and empty sea.

The sun, rising higher, sent a strip of light through the open window onto the bed. It fell upon Robert's face, and he stirred a little. Kathleen rose quietly from her seat to close the shutters. When she returned he was lying in a slightly altered position, his eyes open, and was glancing around him.

He showed no surprise as she bent over him.

"Is it you, then, Kathleen—really you?" he asked, in a weak voice.

She was on her knees beside him now. "Yes," she said tremulously.

His eyes rested on her downcast face for a moment, then he spoke again:

"How did you get here?"

"By the *Ascanius*," she answered. "But, oh, Robert, you must not talk. You have been ill—you are still."

He sighed and nodded, then his lips moved.

"I shall get better now that you are here, Kathleen. I was ill last night, I believe. Delirious—something of that sort—I've not a very clear idea. But that's past, and you are here." He fixed tired eyes upon her earnestly, as if he feared she might vanish again.

"I wanted to come ashore last night," she told him in her soft voice. "I could see the island from the ship, but Captain Marquet said it would be dangerous to try and land at night. But if I had known that you were ill——"

Her voice failed her suddenly. He looked at her with the faint flicker of a smile in his eyes.

"So Fate's hammer on Calvary Island was the thumping of the steamer's screw?" he whispered. "Well, why not? Why shouldn't the *Ascanius* be the chosen instrument of Fate?"

She feared he was delirious again, but his eyes reassured her. He gave her a clear glance.

"Tell me what brought you out here to me, Kathleen?" he said.

"To ask you to forgive me," she murmured, coming still closer. "I—I know the truth now."

He did not ask her how she had learnt it, and she was thankful for that. A smile crept into his face which she had never seen there before—one of peace and content. The old whimsical glance of the Robert Lynngarth she had known long ago came into his eyes as he looked at her now.

"You're forgiven, Lady Fibbets, if you'll bend over and kiss me. I'm a bit too weak to sit up yet. You owe me something, you know——"

He asked no more questions after that, but lay with closed eyes, breathing heavily. A slight pressure of his hand told Kathleen that he was aware of her presence.

They remained thus in perfect quietude until her eyes, dwelling on the open sea, saw the black shadow of the returning boat moving rapidly over the clear surface towards the landing-place.

CHAPTER XXXV

SANCTUARY

IN Hampshire the winter lingered, and a white land sparkled beneath a cold sun. The snow covered the lawns and gardens at Redways, and partly hid the old house from sight. But the primroses were out in the sheltered lanes, and spring was not very far away.

The short dusk was drawing on, and the rooks were trailing homeward like inky spots against a steel-coloured sky. All was still about Redways in the early gloaming. The windows were unlighted yet, and the place looked deserted.

Then the front door opened and a man appeared.

It was Robert Lynngarth. He stepped down from the terrace, crossed the rimed garden, and went through the rustic gate which led across the fields. He walked quickly, like one with a definite object in view.

He had been back in England for some months—for the better part of a year, in fact. They had been months of slow illness and lingering convalescence, but he was now well again. He was staying in the old house alone, and it was the eve of his wedding day. He and Kathleen were to be married on the following day in London. Then Paris, the Riviera, and Italy—such was the projected outline of the honeymoon, planned by Kathleen with loving care, with an eye to his complete restoration in soft airs, before they returned to Redways at the time of the nightingales.

Changes and opening vistas—yes. The future was

before him, fair and hopeful. But on this last evening he had a last tryst with one enshrined in his memory.

He walked on through the fields to where black yews encircled a place in which the dead slept beneath a soft white covering. His footsteps fell noiselessly in the snow as he made his way across the churchyard to the family grave.

Two names had been added since he left England: those of his father and his father's second wife. On the column which marked their resting-place their names were carved beneath his mother's—three names now—and below was the text he had pondered over that afternoon nearly a year ago:

“O death, where is thy sting?
O grave, where is thy victory?”

The words were carved deep in the frosted stone, as if meant thus to be graven in triumphant conviction upon the hearts of all who read them.

Stella had died before his return, and had been brought there for burial in the spring, in the golden tide of the daffodils. She had died at the nursing home in South Kensington some weeks after Glenluce had seen her there. From that time onward she had weakened daily until the end. Medical science had been baffled by her case. Nothing organic: general weakness, lack of rallying power; the doctors clung to their shibboleths until the last. So much Robert had learnt from Glenluce, who, with the Horburys, had followed her to the grave. But Robert knew more than the men who physic the flesh. Hers was an illness of the spirit. She had sustained a mortal wound there, and died of the hurt. She had died because she wanted to die. The grave had won no victory over her.

Life had held nothing for her, alas! She had told him so when he last saw her.

Vividly he recalled that parting now, and her last look as the train moved out: a look which would abide with him until obliterated by death. And Glenluce had given him her last message. "Give him my love when he returns: he will understand. . . ."

Had he always understood? Had he done right where she was concerned? Standing by her graveside now, he asked himself these questions with a sad heart. And worldly wisdom sought to comfort him with the assurance that he had done everything for the best.

As he mused thus, the face of Kathleen seemed to rise between him and his gloomy fancies, looking at him as she would look at him on the morrow, with eyes of tender and steadfast love. The vision brought him back from the past to the present. To-morrow! Happiness was to be his—happiness beyond his deserts. That, and his life, were Stella's gifts to him. He bent and kissed her name on the stone.

"Good night, dear Stella," he said softly, and turned away from the darkening churchyard, to walk slowly homeward across the fields.

THE END



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